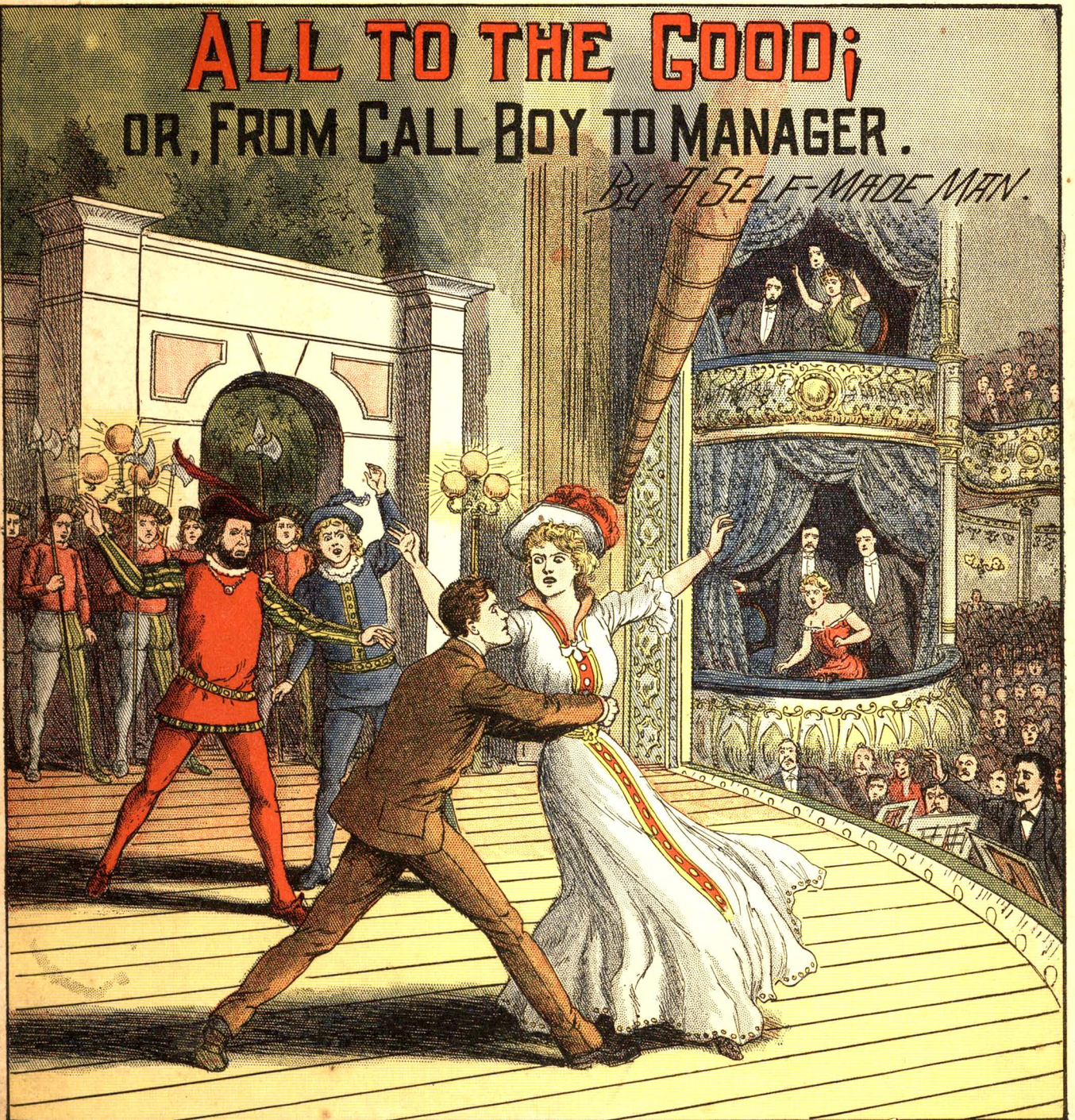


FAME AND FORTUNE WEEKLY.

STORIES OF BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY.

ALL TO THE GOOD;
OR, FROM CALL BOY TO MANAGER.

By A SELF-MADE MAN.



Estelle, unfortunately, stood directly in line with the descending curtain. In another instant she would have been dashed to the stage, when Charlie, seeing her peril from the wings, darted forward, seized her around the waist, and dragged her back.

Fame and Fortune Weekly

STORIES OF BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1906, in the office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by Frank Tousey, Publisher, 24 Union Square, New York.

No. 21

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 23, 1906.

Price 5 Cents

ALL TO THE GOOD;

OR,

From Call Boy to Manager.

By A SELF-MADE MAN.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCES THE HERO AND HIS FRIEND, BILLY DUANE.

"Charlie! Charlie Unger! Where the dickens is that boy?"

"Here I am, sir!"

A cheerful-looking, well built lad suddenly popped out from behind a pile of faded scenery that stood against the whitewashed brick wall near the property-room* of the Metropolitan theater.

As a temple of the drama, the Metropolitan was on its last legs.

It was one of the old guard, so to speak.

Its former glory was hoary and mildewed.

Its patronage had gone to the dogs, though occasionally it had spasms of prosperity.

One of those spasms was on now, but the impression prevailed that it was giving its last kick.

"Do you know, young man, that I sung out three times for you?" said Mr. Chips, the property-man.

"Yes, sir," replied Charlie, truthfully.

"Then why didn't you come sooner? Were you taking a bath, or getting your hair curled?" added Mr. Chips, sarcastically.

"Neither, sir. I was only showing Billy Duane how to do the broadsword combat properly."

"What the dickens has Billy Duane, or you, to do with the broadsword combat? Perhaps you think that the distinguished tragedian who appears here for the first time this evening will ask you to act as his understudy."

This remark of the property-man was, of course, purely ironical.

"Well," replied Unger, serenely, "he might do worse."

"If you haven't a gall!" exclaimed Mr. Chips, regarding the bright boy in astonishment.

"I believe I have, sir," answered Charlie, demurely. "I heard a doctor once say that everybody has got it."

"Got what?" asked the puzzled property-man.

"Gall, sir."

Mr. Chips shied the pasteboard goblet he held in his hand at Charlie's head; but Unger, evidently expecting some such demonstration on the property-man's part, dodged in the nick of time.

"Pick up that goblet, you young scamp, and come into the property-room."

"Yes, sir," replied the boy, obeying the order.

He and Mr. Chips were good friends, on the whole, though, owing to his irresponsible flow of spirits, he occasionally sorely tried the man's patience.

There was nothing malicious about Unger's nature.

As a smart, clear-headed and ambitious boy, he was all to the good.

But you could not tread on Charlie's toes without finding out he was alive, and very much alive, at that.

Unger's father was a member of the orchestra of the Metropolitan.

His mother, who once upon a time had been a tight-rope dancer, and a great favorite in her day, kept a theatrical boarding-house; and Charlie said more than once that he had accumulated a good deal of muscle by pounding chuck steak into the juicy tenderness to which the profession is accustomed.

When Unger graduated from the public school he was introduced into the mystery of the region behind the foot-lights—in other words, he was made a call-boy and an assistant to the property-man, his wages being collected regularly by his mother at the same time that she drew her husband's pay, when business was sufficiently flourishing for the "ghost"* to walk.

Charlie yearned to be something better than a call-boy.

No, he did not want to be an actor, though he believed he could do a few stunts in that line if it came to a pinch.

His great ambition was to some day manage a show.

Not a bum show, if he could help it, but something worth while.

"There's a barrel of money in it," he often said to his friend Billy Duane, "if you know how to handle things and have ordinary luck."

So with that end in view he kept his eyes and ears well employed, learning all the ins and outs of the business, especially that end which deals with the front of the "house."

"By the way, Charlie," remarked Mr. Chips, after the boy had been industriously helping him fix the rents in the green cover of a property piece, which was to be used to represent part of the bank of a sylvan stream, "do you really think you would ever make an actor?"

"Well, sir, I can't say that I'm particularly anxious to be one. The ghost doesn't seem to walk as regularly in the profession as I would like."

"True enough," sighed Mr. Chips, who had a large family to support.

"Still, I might do worse, as the man remarked when about to marry his cook."

The property-man grinned.

"You see," continued the boy, "I belong to a theatrical family, so there's no telling but I may become a second Booth."

"I never heard that any of your folks were actors," said Mr. Chips, with some curiosity.

"I didn't say they were actors. Mam used to trip the light fantastic on the tight rope; pop, you know, rasps the big fiddle in the orchestra; my grandfather was a famous 'supe' in his day at the old Bowery in New York, while my grandmother, I've heard, used to wash for the im-

mortal Forrest. So you see our family is connected with the profession from way back."

"That's true enough, if you put it that way," said Mr. Chips, as he sat down on the repaired "bank," for he was tired after a hard afternoon's work.

But he sprang up again with a promptness that would have made an eyewitness believe that he was accustomed to resting himself on the wing.

"Great Scott!" he howled, tenderly caressing with one hand the seat of his trousers. "What in thunder was that?"

"What's the matter, Mr. Chips?" inquired Charlie, apparently astonished at the sudden agility displayed by the property-man.

"Look here, Unger, did you leave your needle in that cloth?"

"Why, no, sir; here is the one I was working with."

"Well, something stung me worse than a hornet's tail. Perhaps it was a bent pin," and the speaker eyed Charlie with a strong suspicion.

"I've heard of such things," replied Unger, innocently, looking closely at the middle of the "bank." "No, sir," he added; "no such thing as a bent pin here. There is something, though. Perhaps if you look you can tell what it is."

Mr. Chips first felt of the obstruction, and then examined it.

"Jumping Jehoshaphat! If it ain't a big thorn! I'd like to know how it came to get in that bank."

"I should think it was the proper place to find such a thing, Mr. Chips," said Charlie, edging toward the door.

"How do you make that out?" growled the property-man, with a gusty look.

"Why, sir, you'll often find thorns growing on the banks of streams."

Mr. Chips caught up a papier-mache flagon and flung it wrathfully at Unger, but it only hit the closed door of the property-room, for the boy had skilfully put himself on the other side of it, and was hastening away to find his friend Billy Duane.

Billy was on the scene painter's staging, up in the "flies."

He was busy applying a coat of sizing with a wide brush to the canvas surface of a pair of old "wings,"* which were to be repainted with a fresh subject.

"Hello, Billy," said Charlie, after dodging about among a perfect maze of ropes and pulleys and finally swinging himself upon the scaffold; "that's a pretty good-sized wing you are at work upon."

"It will be when I'm through with it," answered his friend, with a grin, blurring out a Gothic window with a couple of swipes of the brush, for he saw through the pun at once.

Then Unger told Billy about the thorn incident.

"There never was a rose without a thorn," he concluded.

*Among theatrical people the "ghost" walks when salaries are paid.

*Narrow side pieces, matching the back scene, held in place by wooden grooves, top and bottom, which prevent the audience from seeing the space behind the stage proper

"What do you mean by that?" asked Duane, pausing in the act of glazing over a mimic coat-of-arms.

"Why, when Mr. Chips sat down upon the thorn he rose quickly. See the point?"

"Old Chips felt the point, I'll bet," snickered Billy.

"So he did; but I'm sorry Mr. Chips discovered that thorn."

"Sorry!" exclaimed his companion, surprised. "Didn't you put it there for him to sit upon it?"

"That thorn," exclaimed Charlie, with a wink, "was intended to awaken in the mighty brain of McKean Ranter, the eminent tragedian who opens here to-night, a sense of the unexpected. That green-covered bank makes its appearance in the third act, and Mr. Ranter sits upon it to soliloquize. He has a long speech, and I thought a little of the spectacular would add to the interest of the scene."

"That would be great," chuckled Billy.

"But now the whole thing is spoiled, because Mr. Chips selected that particular spot to rest himself."

"What's the matter with putting another thorn, or a bent pin, into the old thing and let her rip?"

"No, Billy. Mr. Chip is on to it, and I might get the bounce. I'm afraid the eminent tragedian has missed the opportunity of his life."

"There are more ways than one of killing a cat," suggested Billy.

"So I've heard," replied Charlie, thoughtfully. "However, it's time you quit work. I'm going to supper."

"Your ma has a full house now, hasn't she?"

"Yes, she's doing well; but some of the boarders will bear watching. Chubb, our first low com., failed to ante up this week, and ma has a lasso ready in case he tries to sneak with his bundle. Last week we had Frypani, the contortionist; but he faded away after ma asked him to cough up. He left an old grip behind with two bricks in it. Then there was Miss Brown, who does juvenile leads when she's lucky to catch on. She owed ma two weeks' board, and promised to come up as soon as the ghost walked at Benson's Music Hall, where she was doing a turn last week."

"Well, did she?" asked Billy, with some interest.

"If she did, ma doesn't know it yet," said Charlie, walking toward the stage door with Billy at his heels.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH CHARLIE GIVES AN EXHIBITION OF PRESENCE OF MIND.

There was a big "first night" crowd at the Metropolitan that evening.

McKean Ranter, the "eminent tragedian," had been extensively billed, the newspapers had given him flattering advance notices, and public interest in his debut in town was accordingly aroused.

The manager welcomed the unusual rush with open arms,

for he needed the money in his business; while the company was uncommonly glad to see the seats filling up, as the ghost had not meandered about the premises lately with any degree of regularity.

The play was a tragedy of the old school, called "The Dwarf of Venice."

McKean Ranter was the Dwarf, a part originally performed by Edmund Kean, a famous English actor, many years ago, and Mr. Ranter believed he was as good as the great original.

Charlie Unger had seen many good actors, and thought he knew what good acting was.

He sized Mr. Ranter up at a rehearsal, and came to the conclusion that the "eminent tragedian" was something of a "ham."

There was one thing, however, which made Charlie mad.

That was the star's discourteous treatment of Estelle Vance, who had been unexpectedly called upon to fill the leading female part in the tragedy, owing to the sudden indisposition of Mrs. McKean Ranter, who always supported her husband.

In Unger's opinion, Miss Vance was the cleverest member of the Metropolitan company, and the nicest girl he had ever known.

She was as pretty as a peach, sweet and modest, and gave evidence of possessing undoubted talent; but had been considered too young by the management to entrust with an important part.

Her opportunity came when it was found that she was the only available lady to fill Mrs. Ranter's emotional part in "The Dwarf of Venice."

The "eminent tragedian" kicked at her youthfulness, but he was forced to accept her; so he got square by calling her down at every chance, criticising her delivery of blank verse, and finding fault with her "business."

Charlie Unger, to say the truth, was a bit sweet on Estelle Vance, therefore he resented the star's overbearing conduct toward the girl.

"Ho!" muttered Charlie, in disgust, "what does he know about acting, anyway? She can put it all over him. He's afraid she'll make a hit and take the shine all out of him. Bet your whiskers that's what she'll do, too! She's got the center of the stage twice in this piece, and if she doesn't make him look like thirty cents, I'm no prophet. He's an old fool, and I wouldn't do a thing to him if I got the chance."

Charlie arrived early at the theater that night, for there was lots for him to do before the time came for him to summon the performers from their dressing-rooms.

It was part of his duty during the show to act as the prompter's assistant.

He had to place on the stage when a scene was being set, or deliver to the actors awaiting their cues in the wings, the various properties to be used from time to time, as specified on a list which hung in front of the prompter's table, getting the articles from the property-room.

"The Dwarf of Venice" opened with a carnival street scene, for which a mob of male and female supers had

been engaged, and Charlie had manufactured a lot of little white paper bags, which he filled with flour, for them to throw at one another, according to stage directions.

"Hello, Charlie," cried Billy, running against Unger as he was carrying a tray full of the bags to circulate among the male and female populace of Venice, who were dressed and ready for the opening scene. "What you got there?"

"Can't you see what I've got, you thick-headed donkey?" exclaimed Charlie. "Here, you're one of the mob; take your pick."

"I won't do a thing to the gals," grinned Billy, grabbing more than his share. "Who you goin' to give that big bag to you've got on your arm?"

"Don't you worry about that big bag," replied Unger. "That'll make it's first appearance on any stage in the second scene."

"The second scene!" ejaculated Billy. "Why, the flour is only used in the first."

"Who told you that?" answered Charlie, with a chuckle.

"Don't you s'pose I know all about this piece?"

"You think you do; but if you keep your eyes open you may learn something more about it."

"Say, Charlie Unger, what game are you up to?"

"Don't bother me, please. It's nearly eight, and the prompter will ring up in a moment or two. I've got to distribute this load," and Unger began to circulate among the supers.

"There's something in the wind," muttered Duane, "and I'm goin' to find out what it is, bet your boots."

He watched closely, and as the captain of the supers was driving his satellites on the stage, where they were to be discovered when the curtain arose, Billy saw Charlie glide into L. U. E. (upper entrance on the left-hand side of the stage), attach the bag to a cord which hung over the flies, let it swing out, and then haul it up out of sight among the borders.

All this took place behind the street "drop" representing the first scene.

The bag hung directly above a gilded lounge upon which the "eminent tragedian" was discovered fifteen minutes later when the front scene was drawn up.

McKean Ranter was received with a burst of applause.

He was made up to represent a grotesque and malignant dwarf, whose disposition was as crooked as his body.

His opening words, uttered in a deep, rasping tone, were:

"Why am I fashioned thus for scorn? Why this degraded being?"

Charlie had noticed the two sentences at rehearsal, and the fine possibilities of the situation for startling effect were not lost upon him.

No sooner had McKean Ranter delivered the words, pausing a moment to give effect to his delivery, than Unger, who was negligently leaning against a wing in the upper entrance, released the end of the string which had been tied to a nail in the framework to keep the bag of flour suspended.

The effect was electrical.

The bag descended like a flash of lightning, struck the star on the wig and, bursting open, deluged him with a cataract of flour.

The audience was taken by surprise.

So was Mr. Ranter, who was furious, for his opening scene was ruined.

He rushed blindly off the stage with his eyes full of flour, consequently he did not observe Billy Duane, who had seen the whole thing and lay convulsed with mirth directly in his path.

The consequence was the "eminent tragedian" tripped over him, and shot headlong across the scenes with a thud which almost shook the house.

His wig flew in one direction, his legs in another.

The latter being long, they encountered the dainty ankles of a stout female super, and brought her down beside him.

The lady screamed "Murder!" Mr. Ranter swore like a trooper, and there was the dickens to pay till the stage manager rushed up and straightened things out.

The star was finally pacified, an explanation was made to the audience of the accident, and the play went on.

The stage manager instituted an investigation, but it amounted to nothing.

Charlie, who came under suspicion because he had had charge of the small flour bags, was found in the property-room preparing a small wooden box, painted to represent an iron chest, for its appearance in the second act.

He looked so busy and so innocent that the manager did not say anything to him.

"Well," chuckled Unger, when the stage manager turned on his heel, "I've got square with that stuff for the roasting he gave Miss Vance. If he doesn't leave her alone in the future, he will hear from me again, all right."

Mr. McKean Ranter was decidedly out of humor that evening, and he showed his temper in various ways between the acts.

Estelle Vance shared the honor of a curtain call with him at the close of the third act, and that did not improve his feelings toward the girl.

As soon as they came off he insulted her by some remark intended as a reflection on her ability as an actress.

Unger did not know of this, but he saw she was disturbed and excited, and that there were tears in her eyes when he met her on her way to her dressing-room.

"You are doing fine to-night, Miss Vance," he said to her, thinking she was a bit rattled by the success she was making in her part.

"Thank you, Charlie," she replied, with a grateful smile, for she knew that he was thoroughly sincere in his congratulations.

"Don't mention it. I knew you'd get there if you got the chance."

The indignant flush Ranter had brought to her face died away at these words.

"You are very good to encourage me, Charlie. I shan't forget it," and she passed on.

"She's a fine little girl, all right," said the boy to him-

self, as his eyes followed her sylph-like figure till she tripped up a short flight of steps leading to a tier of dressing-rooms.

The climax of the play came in the fourth act, and had Mr. Ranter really been the eminent tragedian he assumed to be, the honors would have been fully divided between the star and the leading lady, for Estelle Vance came out strong in the emotional part.

As it was, however, McKean Ranter was not in it a little bit with the brilliant young girl, who astonished the company as well as the management by her wonderful power when it came to the test.

Charlie watched her whenever he got the chance, and felt a personal satisfaction in the hit she was making.

"She's great, isn't she, Billy?" he said to his friend Duane, as they stood in the wings while the act was drawing to a close.

"Well, I should warble," replied Billy, enthusiastically. "She can give cards and spades to Lillian Burr, who used to do the leads. I didn't think she had it in her."

"Didn't you? Well, I did; I know talent when I see it."

"How could you tell, when she never played a responsible part till now?"

"Ho! She showed what she was capable of by the way she handled the small characters. She's a real natural-born actress. None of your imitation fakirs who put up a big bluff and then fall down when you put it up to them."

"She's all right. Look at the way she's laying it over Ranter now. That's acting, all right."

"Bet your whiskers it is! Ranter looks as mad as a hornet."

The girl's splendid acting took the house by storm, and the act ended with a quick drop.

Estelle, unfortunately, stood directly in line with the descending curtain.

In another instant she would have been dashed to the stage, when Charlie, seeing her peril from the wings, darted forward, seized her round the waist, and dragged her back.

Then the heavy piece of wood which held the bottom of the curtain taut fell with a dull thud.

CHAPTER III.

HOW CHARLIE GETS SQUARE WITH THE LOW COMEDIAN.

The audience saw and understood the danger Estelle Vance was in at the moment the call-boy rushed to her rescue, and when he pulled her clear, and the curtain shut the stage from their view, a roar of applause went up, from the orchestra to the gallery.

The principal performers, the "eminent tragedian" excepted, crowded about the now half-fainting girl, held on her feet by Charlie, and congratulated her on her escape, for every one knew what a blow on the head from the curtain pole meant.

They also complimented Unger on his presence of mind. "Both of you will have to go in front," said the stage manager, coming up. "Do you hear that ovation out there? Nothing but a sight of you two will satisfy them."

"Ho, don't ring me in this! That demonstration is intended for Miss Vance," said Charlie, as he released the little actress.

Estelle had now recovered her self-possession.

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Charlie," she said, her pretty eyes beaming with gratitude. "I believe you saved my life."

"Glad to have rendered you a service, Miss Vance," he replied, his heart thumping with satisfaction.

"Come now," and she extended her hand, "it's your place to lead me out."

She favored him with a bewitching smile.

"Oh, I say," he objected, "I'm not in this."

"Yes you are," and she dragged him unwillingly toward the right proscenium entrance.

The prompter pulled back the end of the curtain, and Estelle gave Charlie a gentle push forward.

The boy saw he was in for it, and made the best of the situation.

He stepped toward the footlights, holding Estelle Vance by the hand, and the audience clapped its hands vociferously as they came into view.

Both bowed in acknowledgment and stepped back.

Estelle released her hand and curtsied to Charlie.

Unger returned the compliment, and as the girl retired he bowed again to the audience and backed out himself.

McKean Ranter, who had been accustomed to get the call with his wife at the end of this act, was left completely in the shade on this occasion, and perhaps he wasn't a wild actor!

Well, say, he fairly frothed at the mouth, and jumped on the stage manager like a thousand of brick.

He had some idea of quitting then and there, but was persuaded to reconsider the matter when the manager told him it would hurt his reputation.

There was a notice of the show, of course, in all the morning papers, and the "eminent tragedian" got the short end of the critics' attention.

Estelle Vance's work was favorably commented on, and she was hailed as a new light upon the local stage.

Incidentally, Charlie Unger came in for a share of fame for his part in the curtain incident.

"Seen Chips this mornin', Charlie?" inquired Billy Duane, with a grin, when the two boys met on the stage half an hour before the rehearsal, which had been called for ten.

"Certainly I have," replied Unger, serenely.

"Did he give you a layin' out?"

"What for?"

"Oh, come off! For puttin' up that flour job on Ranter, of course."

"Well, he was kind of mad about something," admitted Charlie, with a chuckle; "but I couldn't give him any information about how that bag of flour got into the flies."

"You got off easy, for Briggs, the stage manager, gave him an awful jawing after the show. I heard him say that Chubb, the low comedian, told him that he was sure you were at the bottom of the affair."

"Very kind of Chubb. I shan't forget him."

"I wouldn't. He isn't any friend of yours, if he does board at your ma's."

"We do the same piece to-night, don't we, Billy?"

"Yep."

"Chubb, in the part of Gull, is supposed to get a ducking in the fourth act, isn't he?"

"He gets his duckin' in the canal, not in the fourth act," grinned Billy.

"Don't be funny, please. He comes on in the third scene without hat or coat, shivering as if he was wet and cold."

"That's what he does."

"Well, he doesn't do it natural enough to suit me. He might make a hit with the gallery if he did it the right way. I'll see what I can do to help him."

"What are you goin' to do to him?" asked Billy, inquisitively.

"You want to know too much all at once. I owe Chubb something, anyway, for trying to hang up ma for last week's board when he had the price, all right. Chubb is two-faced, and I don't like that kind of person. So just keep your eyes skinned, and perhaps you'll see an improvement in his acting to-night."

Charlie then recollected that he had some business in the property-room to attend to, and walked off.

"Do you see that ducal chair there?" said Mr. Chips, as Unger entered the room.

"Sure thing."

"Give the seat of it a coat of green paint, so it will be dry for to-night."

"Yes, sir," and Charlie got the pot of color, added a small quantity of turps, and was soon carrying out his instructions.

"Now you can varnish this jewel-box," said the property-man when Unger had finished with the chair, "and put it on yonder shelf to dry."

"All right, sir."

In a few minutes Mr. Chips went out of the room.

He had not been gone more than a moment before Chubb, the low comedian, sauntered in.

If Chubb had not been an actor he probably would have been a detective.

He imagined he was an ideal sleuth.

He did not like Charlie Unger, and his object in coming into the property-room was to worm himself into the boy's confidence and get him to confess that he was guilty of the flour bag trick.

Then he meant to carry his knowledge to Briggs, the stage manager, hoping he would bounce the call-boy.

There was nothing mean about Chubb—of course not—but Charlie was dead on to him, all right.

"That was a smart trick you worked on Ranter last

night, Unger," he began, with an encouraging grin, as if he was in direct sympathy with the boy.

But Charlie was not deceived for one moment.

"I don't see what makes you think I did that trick, Mr. Chubb," replied the boy, with a guileless look. "Mr. Ranter is a great actor, and I wouldn't do a thing to him."

"Of course you wouldn't," answered Chubb, sarcastically. "You aren't built that way, are you? All the same, you did it, my mocking-bird. Come, now," insinuatingly, "tell me how you managed it. I won't give you away."

Charlie did not bite worth a cent, and after several fruitless endeavors to draw the boy out the low comedian, in great disgust, plumped himself down in the ducal chair, which stood invitingly at hand, and began to abuse Unger roundly.

"I wouldn't sit on that chair if I was you," said Charlie quietly, but with a twinkle in his eye.

"I'll sit where I choose, young man. Do you understand that?" replied Chubb, loftily.

"All right; I thought I'd warn you, that's all."

"What do you mean by that?" asked the comedian, suspiciously.

"Nothing much," answered the boy, coolly, "only I just put a coat of green paint on the seat, and——"

Chubb sprang up as if propelled through a vampire trap.*

The comedian had on a brand new pair of light-colored trousers that morning, and he soon discovered that they were completely spoiled.

"You young villain, you've ruined my pants!" he cried furiously, making a rush at the boy.

He was so mad that he did not notice that Charlie, as he slipped to one side, kicked the pot of green paint directly in his path.

The result was that Chubb tripped over it, and as the paint spread in the same direction the comedian went floundering, the actor was spotted from head to foot with big dabs of the brightest emerald tint.

When Chubb recovered his feet and saw the condition he was in he would have killed Unger if he could have laid his hands on the boy.

He had to go through rehearsal that morning in a pair of dirty overalls, which made him the butt of the whole company, and, what was worse, an object of scorn to the soubrette, on whom he was mashed.

There was another good house that evening, attracted rather by the reports of Estelle Vance's remarkable acting than by a desire to see the "eminent tragedian," who was looked upon as a failure.

Everything went on swimmingly until the third scene of the fourth act, in which a silly character called Gull, represented by Chubb, is carried off the stage kicking by a party of villagers, who intend ducking him in the canal.

Shortly afterward he re-enters, apparently water-soaked,

*A round trap in the stage, resembling a pie cut in six sections, each working upward on a hinge, and through which demons and such supernatural characters in spectacular plays and pantomimes are propelled with great speed from beneath the stage by means of powerful mechanism.

exclaiming: "A double plague on all knaves! I carry half the water of the canal in my pockets," etc.

In due course Chubb was bundled off the stage in great shape, while the gallery roared its approval in its usual hilarious fashion.

The comedian removed a part of his costume in the wings and then waited for his cue to re-enter.

In a few moments he got it.

Then something unexpected happened.

Somebody had hung one of the fire pails from a stout nail in the wing.

It was full of water.

Of course that was no place for it, but it was there, just the same.

By some mysterious means the bottom of that pail was jerked up, and its contents descended in a shower bath on the actor just as he started forward, so that his appearance before the audience on this occasion was sufficiently realistic to please the most critical observer.

And while he shivered—with no fictitious shiver—on the stage Charlie Unger and Billy Duane were hugging themselves with glee away up in the flies.

"That was the finest snap yet," chuckled Billy.

"Oh, he's easy. People who hunt for trouble generally find it," replied Unger.

"You're all to the good, Charlie, old boy!"

"I manage to get there with both feet when I set out to do anything, bet your whiskers!"

"There goes the curtain signal," said Billy a few moments later. "We'd better get back to the stage."

And they did.

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH CHARLIE IS ENGAGED FOR A ROAD COMPANY.

On the following evening Mrs. McKean Ranter was able to appear, and consequently Estelle Vance was out of the cast, much to the "eminent tragedian's" satisfaction.

The public did not fancy the change and stayed away.

The consequence was the star and the company played to empty benches.

On Thursday night the bill was changed to "Hamlet," with Mr. Ranter as the melancholy Dane and Mrs. Ranter as Ophelia.

"She's a healthy-looking Ophelia," snickered Billy to Charlie, as they stood in the wings watching the final rehearsal.

Truly she was, for she weighed two hundred and fifty pounds.

"Ho," replied Unger in disgust, "Miss Vance is the one who could play that part way up in G."

"I guess she could. She'd look the part, all right."

"Ranter is making a big mistake in insisting that his wife appear as Ophelia. There won't be a corporal's guard here to-night. It looks as if it will be a pretty thin ghost that will walk on Monday, if it materializes at all."

Unger was right. There were not fifty people in the house, and manager and company, not to speak of the star and his wife, felt pretty blue.

"Richard III." was announced for the next (Friday) night.

Estelle Vance appeared in the cast, but secondary to the ponderous Mrs. Ranter.

When the curtain rose there were about four hundred people in the house.

A little over half were students of a nearby college, who attended in a body and took possession of the family circle.

Every one of the students brought a bulging paper bag.

Before the show was half over the contents of the bags had found their way to the stage, and McKean Ranter was in a wild rage, for one of his eyes had been closed by an overripe egg.

Estelle Vance and a few of the other members of the company were tumultuously applauded whenever they appeared, but the star and his wife were received in solemn silence, and when Ranter was alone on the stage he had to dodge a shower of vegetables.

The duty to gather up the product of the green grocer's fell to Billy Duane.

"There's enough vegetables here to last your mother for a month," grinned Billy, as he showed the pile to Unger.

"I don't think our boarders will be stuck on such a diet after to-night," answered Charlie, laughing.

"They ought to be thankful to get any old thing to eat, for I don't believe the treasurer will have enough dough to go round."

"You're right, Billy. It will be a case of snowballs next week, for I don't think the Metropolitan season will last over to-morrow night."

And it did not.

McKean Ranter and his wife disappeared, and the members of the company found themselves out of a job.

"I hear Mr. Rickaby, the late manager of the Metropolitan, is gettin' up a company for the road," said Billy Duane, meeting his friend on the street one day during the following week.

"Is that so?" replied Charlie, with some interest.

"Yep. He's engaged Miss Vance, Tillie Jacobs and Mrs. Benson; also Dudley Tripp, Howard Austin, Chubb——"

"What, that——"

"Yep. He's a pretty good comedian, even if he is meaner than dirt by nature."

"Who else?"

"Chips is goin' along."

"Where do we come in?"

"I give it up."

"I'm going to see Rickaby. If I don't get out of town with the show ma will put me at some trade I don't care a brace of shakes for."

"See that you put in a good word for me, Charlie. I can fill in at 'most any old thing."

"I won't forget you, Billy."

Unger was not able to locate the manager that morning, but when he arrived home about lunch time his father,

who was helping about the kitchen, told him Mr. Rickaby had sent word that he wanted to see him that afternoon at Ridley's Dramatic Agency.

Charlie, filled with visions of a chance on the road, did not let the grass grow under his feet in keeping the engagement.

When Unger arrived at the agency Manager Rickaby was talking to Ridley in his private office.

The door was open, however, and Charlie easily heard all they said.

"I want a good heavy man and a juvenile who can double in brass; an experienced double bass and tuba who can double stage; a comedian who can do a strong specialty, Dutch preferred, and a few other useful performers who can double in band. I'm not paying fancy salaries. I pay everything."

"All right, Rickaby. I have some of the people you want on my books now. I'll have 'em around here to-morrow and you can talk to 'em. When do you go out?"

"Next week—just as soon as I can get my paper. I've got the first part of my route booked up solid."

"You're doing well, Rickaby. I see you're a hustler. Got an 'angel'* at your back?" with a grin.

"I'm not saying anything," replied Rickaby, brusquely.

"Can I do anything else for you?" asked the agent.

"No, I guess not just now," and Manager Rickaby got up and came out into the reception-room. "Hello, Unger!" greeting the boy. "Come over here; I want to talk with you."

Charlie crossed the room and sat down beside the manager.

"Look here, young man; how are you on props? Do you think you can take hold and make good if I take you out with me?"

The proposition took Unger by surprise.

"What's the matter with Mr. Chips? I heard you'd engaged him," he said.

"That was my idea. But he went over to the Lyric, and I've got to get some one else. Now, I thought you——"

"I'll go," interrupted Charlie quickly. "I can handle the job all right."

"You seem pretty confident. You've been only a short time in the business."

"I've kept my eyes open, sir. I've picked up a heap since I went to work at the Metropolitan."

"I guess you have. Briggs, who goes out with us, has kept an eye on you, and he recommended you to me. Do you think you can double in small parts?"

"Yes, sir. I'm ready to make myself useful in any way."

"You're prepared to hustle, are you?"

"Yes, sir."

"You won't have an easy snap—it's a case of keeping on the move. You'll be the last to get to bed after the show and the first up next morning."

"I'm not looking for snaps, Mr. Rickaby," said Unger, resolutely. "I expect to work."

"Well, I'll give you a chance. Do you know any bright young chap about your age who could do small parts and help you wrestle with——"

"Sure. What's the matter with Billy Duane? He was a general, all-around helper at the Metropolitan, and filled in as general utility on the stage."

"He's good, is he?"

"That's what he is, and we'll pull together first-class."

"It's a wonder Briggs didn't mention him to me. Bring him around to-morrow at two."

"All right, sir."

Mr. Rickaby then told Unger what he would pay him, which included board and transportation.

"I shall want you to help me some before we start out, so you had better report here every day at two. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's all. You can go now."

Charlie took his departure in great spirits, and went to hunt Billy Duane up.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH CHARLIE HAS A RUN-IN WITH DUDLEY TRIPP.

A week later the "Metropolitan Stock Company" opened in Coffeyville in a melodrama called "Fighting Fate."

A certain amount of special scenery was carried with the piece, and Charlie Unger, and his assistant Billy Duane, found that the most difficult part of their work to handle.

They had to give the expressman a hand in loading the cloths (scenes) and the trunks on his wagon.

Arriving at the theatre, he and Billy had to turn in and help get the stuff into the house, and place the trunks in the proper dressing-rooms to which the stage manager assigned the different members of the company.

At night Charlie had to look after his properties, act as prompter, and play the part of one of the villain's accomplices.

His name was printed on the programme in the cast, and also as "master of properties" under the heading "Executive Staff."

As the company was mostly playing one-night stands, it was a case of hustle day after day.

The moment the show was over at night everything had to be picked up and packed, in readiness for the expressman to cart it to the railroad station.

As soon as the properties were taken care of it was the scenery that had to be got ready for shipment.

It was generally one or two in the morning when Charlie and Billy turned in for their well-earned rest, and they had to be up again early to see that everything was got off all right.

Charlie had determined to make good, and Manager Rickaby was satisfied he was all right, especially as he paid him only half what he would have been obliged to give an experienced man like Chips.

*A moneyed individual who backs a show.

Unger became a general favorite with everybody in the company, except Chubb, the comedian, and Dudley Tripp, the leading man.

They sneered at his efforts to please, and took care to put as much work as they could in his way.

Then they found all the fault they could with him, and were continually kicking to the stage manager because he did not do this or that thing to their satisfaction.

Briggs, however, knew Unger was doing even more than his duty called for, and consequently he had more words of praise than blame for the young master of properties.

Of course Charlie and Estelle Vance, who was playing the leading part in "Fighting Fate," were the best of friends, and sought many opportunities to be in each other's company.

"Say, Charlie," remarked Billy, one afternoon when they had finished setting the stage for the first act of that night's performance in a small town down on the map as Middleburg, "Dudley Tripp is getting pretty sweet on Miss Vance, don't you think?"

"Ho! What of it? She doesn't care anything for him," replied Unger, confidently.

"I should hope not," answered Billy, diving into his pocket for a cigarette. "He puts on altogether too many airs to suit me. It's get off the earth when he's about. I wonder he's so chummy with Chubb."

"I don't wonder. They're birds of a feather."

"They're a pair of knockers, that's what they are," said Billy, nodding his head and then striking a match on the sole of his shoe.

"They're that, all right. Chubb, for instance, is dead sore on Jenkins, because Jenk does a stronger specialty than he. It catches on everywhere, and Chubb is jealous."

"I know. I heard him running Jenkins down to Briggs yesterday."

"It doesn't do him any good. Briggs has a level head and knows what's what. He knows Jenkins can put it all over Chubb and not turn a hair. He's the finest Dutch comedian I ever saw."

"Yep. He's a good one. However, to get back at what I started with. Dudley Tripp is pretty fresh with Miss Vance, and if I was you I'd keep an eye on him. You are her particular friend, and I don't think you'll stand to have her annoyed by that dude."

"I should say not," replied Charlie, resolutely. "Estelle Vance is one of the nicest little girls in the world—too nice to be knocking around the country on one-night stands. Her place is with a good city stock, or with some reliable company playing the larger towns."

"She'll get there in time," observed Billy, crunching the butt of his cigarette under his heel.

The boys left by the stage door together, and strolled up the main street toward the hotel.

Dudley Tripp came out of a barber shop just ahead of them, and turned in the same direction they were going.

Manager Rickaby insisted that all his people should be good dressers, but Mr. Tripp carried the mandate to the extreme.

He was a good-looking fellow, with light curly hair, and his appearance on the street usually raised something of a flutter among the young ladies of the town who chanced to catch sight of him.

Dudley had an exalted opinion of himself.

He posed as a sort of "matinee idol," and was much given to mashing—an indiscretion that Manager Rickaby set his face against.

On this occasion Dudley walked up Main street, swinging a little rattan cane and smoking a choice cigar, looking for all the world as if he owned the town.

Not far ahead was a music and stationery store, in the windows of which the advance man had secured the privilege of exhibiting a series of photographs of the members of the "Metropolitan Stock Company," and a couple of striking scenes from "Fighting Fate."

Two young ladies, one of whom, a lovely brunette, was the daughter of the mayor of the town, came out of the store just as Dudley Tripp came abreast of it.

They stopped to look at the photographs, and the actor, much impressed by the beauty of the dark girl, stepped up alongside of them.

"Isn't he handsome?" exclaimed the mayor's daughter to her companion, pointing to the photo of Tripp, which, with that of Estelle Vance, occupied the center of the frame.

"Yes, but isn't Miss Vance just too lovely for anything?" remarked the other young lady enthusiastically.

"I am glad you admire the photos, young ladies," spoke up Dudley, with a smirk of gratification.

The girls looked at the speaker in startled surprise.

Dudley raised his hat politely.

"I am one of the——" he continued, with his most fascinating smile, when the dark beauty cut him short.

"I think you are very impertinent, sir," she said icily, with an indignant flash in her handsome eyes.

Dudley was rather taken aback, as he was not accustomed to being rebuffed in so decided a way by the fair sex; but his nerve was equal to the occasion.

"I beg your pardon, miss. No offence was intended. You passed a complimentary remark on my photograph—that's my picture next to Miss Vance's—and I was going to offer you a couple of passes for to-night's show. I hope you will accept them," producing two slips of paper marked "admit one," and signed by Manager Rickaby. "It will give me the greatest pleasure if you will——"

The mayor's daughter turned her back squarely on the leading man and, seizing her friend by the arm, walked away, leaving the handsome actor dumfounded.

Charlie and Billy witnessed Dudley Tripp's discomfiture, and were much amused.

Billy was so tickled that he laughed out aloud.

Tripp heard him and turned around.

"What are you laughing at, you little monkey?" he exclaimed angrily, recognizing the pair.

"Nothing," retorted Billy, saucily.

Dudley reached forward, caught him by the ear, jerked him forward, and gave him a slap on the face.

"There; how do you like that?"

"What did you do that for?" cried Billy, mad as a hornet, kicking out and landing on the actor's shins.

"You villain!" roared Dudley, making a dash at the boy.

But Charlie interfered.

"Leave him alone," he said coolly.

"How dare you put your oar in, you whipper-snapper!" cried Tripp, furiously.

He gave Unger a push.

"Don't you do that again, Mr. Tripp," said Charlie, resolutely.

"What's that?"

"I said, don't you put your hands on me that way again."

"I'll knock the stuffing out of you, you measly little puppy," gritted the leading man, in a rage, aiming a blow at the young master of properties.

The boy ducked and then struck out himself.

His hard fist caught Dudley under the ear.

The actor staggered and then fell to the sidewalk.

"Come on, Billy," said Charlie, quietly, "let's go on. This affair is attracting attention."

"I'd like to punch him in the eye myself," muttered his assistant, as the two moved away.

The two young ladies had paused a little distance away, and observed the proceedings with quiet satisfaction.

Charlie raised his hat to them, and was passing on, when the dark girl spoke:

"You treated him to what he deserved, and I am very much obliged to you."

"He certainly had no right to address you, miss," he answered politely. "I am sorry to say he is a member of our company, and I hope you will permit me to apologize for him."

"Are you an actor, too?" she asked, smilingly.

"Hardly that, though I play a small part in the piece. I am the property man of the company."

"Property man?" she exclaimed, in some perplexity. "May I ask what——?"

"Certainly," replied Charlie, courteously, and he proceeded to explain in a general way what his duties were.

"You are very kind, and much more of a gentleman than that other person."

"Thank you, miss. I hope you will come to the show this evening. It is a good one."

"I think I will ask my father to take me," she replied, with a smile. "He is the mayor of this town."

"Then I've had the honor of talking to——"

"Miss Jennie Ripley. Allow me to introduce my friend, Miss Bates."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Bates; and you, too, Miss Ripley. This is my friend, William Duane. He is also connected with the show."

"But you haven't told me your name," Miss Ripley said, laughingly.

"Charles Unger."

"Thank you. I will look for you on the programme if I attend the performance this evening. I hope you won't

get into trouble because you knocked that presuming fellow down."

"I'm not worrying about it, Miss Ripley. Here is our hotel, so I wish you good-afternoon, ladies," and the two boys raised their hats and left them.

"Isn't he a nice boy!" Charlie heard the mayor's daughter remark to her friend as they passed on.

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH DUDLEY TRIPP AND CHUBB CONSPIRE TO DO UP CHARLIE UNGER.

When Charlie and Billy went in to supper that evening most of the company were already at a long table assigned to them.

The only two vacant seats together faced Dudley Tripp, who looked up at their entrance and regarded them with a dark scowl.

Charlie saw that he had made an enemy of the man, but that fact did not greatly distress him, as their previous relations had not been of a very cordial nature.

Billy nudged him as they were eating their soup.

"Tripp looks as if something disagreed with him," he snickered.

"That something seems to be you and I, Billy," he replied in a whisper.

"We took him down a peg or two, I'm thinkin'. I guess he'll leave us alone in the future."

"I wish I could believe it," answered Charlie; "but it's my opinion we'll hear from him again before long."

"Then I feel sorry for him. If he knows when he's well off he'll keep his distance. I'm always loaded for business, and I'm liable to go off if I'm not handled gently," grinned Billy, calling for more rare roast beef.

"We'll stick together, at any rate, Billy. He'll have to do us both to get square. That will be a pretty big contract, unless he gets that measly Chubb to help him."

"Ho, I'd just as soon put a mansard roof over Chubb's eye as not," snorted the utility lad. "I can do it, too, bet your life."

That night Briggs told Billy to get a hammer and nails and fix a shelf in one of the dressing-rooms which had become loose.

The boy started to hunt the articles up, but was unsuccessful.

Finally he went out to the stage door and asked the watchman who acted as doorkeeper if he knew where such things could be found about the theater.

"You'll find a hammer and box of nails in the cellar under the stage," said the man.

"Whereabouts in the cellar?"

"On a shelf just inside the door."

"All right," answered Billy, and he made a break for the stairs which led down to the lower regions.

No one ever went down there at night, and there was

not any light to guide the boy; but that did not bother Billy, as he had some matches in his pocket.

He slipped down the steps noiselessly, for his shoes were well worn; and when he reached the foot of the stairs was about to strike a light, when he heard the sound of voices, which he recognized as Dudley Tripp's and Chubb's.

He wondered what they were doing down there in the dark.

"Up to no good, I'll bet," he muttered, bending his head forward in a listening attitude.

"I'd give something to get square with that infernal Unger," he heard Tripp say malevolently.

Apparently Dudley had just been rehearsing his vexatious encounter of the afternoon and was looking for the comedian's sympathy.

"That oughtn't to be hard. Why don't you give him a good licking to-night after the show? I'll stand by and see you have a fair show at him," said Chubb. "He always has to stay back to pack up the stuff—he and that little monkey of a Duane. I'll keep that little imp from shoving in his oar, while you knock the stuffing out of Unger."

"No," objected Dudley, for reasons which he did not seem to care to explain. "I want to do better than that."

"What do you mean by better?" asked the comedian.

"I'd like to fix him some way that would bring about his discharge. I hate the sight of the fellow."

"Not more than I do. His mother froze on to my trunk because I couldn't cough up the few measly plunks I owe her. I had to fire my duds out of the window the night before we left town, or I shouldn't have had a thing to wear. Then I owe him a grudge for spoiling my new suit in the property-room at the Metropolitan. It would give me great pleasure to wring his beastly neck."

"Well, I'm glad you're down on him, too. Perhaps between us we can hatch up something that will put him out of business."

"I only wish we could. He seems to have worked himself next to the soft side of Briggs, for all our kicking against him hasn't amounted to a row of shucks. If he only made some serious mistake we could catch him where his hair is short. I don't see how he gets along so well. He was only call-boy and assistant to Chips at the theater. He had an awful nerve to apply for the job of property-man of this show."

"Rickaby must have been off his base to engage him," agreed Dudley, sneeringly.

"Rickaby wanted to save the dough. Besides, I heard that Briggs recommended him."

"Well, he's a ham at the business, and we ought to show him up," said the leading man, maliciously.

"I'm ready to do my share toward the good work," chuckled Chubb, vindictively.

"Look here, Chubb," said Dudley, suddenly, "I've an idea."

"Have you? Spit it out, then."

"You know, in the third act there's a set bridge across U. E., over which the Dutchman, Jenkins, flees from his pursuers."

"Sure."

"Unger and Duane put it together with bolts when they are setting the scene."

"Well?"

"If the bridge wasn't properly braced, the chances are that it would go down with Jenkins when he stepped upon it."

"Oh, those boys look out for that. I've noticed they're very careful to test it just before the curtain goes up on the act."

"Suppose, after they had tested it, somebody was to loosen and remove the bolts holding the braces in position there'd be an accident. Jenkins might get hurt, but that wouldn't worry you any, I guess."

"Not in the least," replied Chubb, vindictively. "I hate the fellow. He thinks he is the whole show with that dialect song and dance of his, which catches the jays, but would be a frost in town."

"Well, such an accident would spoil the act, and, especially if Jenkins was injured, raise merry Old Nick. Briggs would find on investigation that the bolts had apparently been forgotten, and Unger and his pal would get it good and hard where the chicken got the ax," with a sardonic chuckle.

"That's a good scheme," admitted the envious comedian, "but who's going to work the trick?"

"You might do it with a monkey wrench," suggested Dudley, complacently.

"Thanks. And if I was caught monkeying with the screws, what then?" replied Chubb, who had a healthy respect for his own little person.

"Pshaw! You don't want to get caught."

"Well, it's your scheme; what's the matter with you drawing the bolts yourself?"

"I will if you haven't the nerve to take a chance. We'll both assume a part of the responsibility."

"How?"

"You keep watch while I do the job, and you can take charge of the bolts until you find a chance to get rid of them."

"All right," agreed Chubb. "I won't keep 'em long, you may gamble on it."

"Then we'll do it to-night. The sooner we get rid of that upstart the better it'll suit me."

"Same here."

"Then I look to you to hand me the wrench. All you have to do is to notice where Unger puts it when he's through with the job of arranging the bridge. Get hold of it at once and bring it to me. I'll be on hand waiting for it. The moment Unger has tested the set-piece, and got away, we'll watch our chance and put in our work."

"You've got a great head, Tripp," said Chubb, admiringly. "I wouldn't have thought of that scheme in a coon's age."

"Oh, I know a thing or two, I guess," replied the leading man, complacently. "Well, that's settled, then; so we'd better get up to our dressing-room and get into clothes."

Billy drew aside in the darkness and let the rascally actors pass him.

"If this isn't the coolest piece of crooked work I ever heard of," muttered the boy, as he lit a match and looked for the shelf where the hammer and nails reposed. "It's mighty fortunate I had to come down here after this tool," as he grabbed the hammer and several nails and started back to the stage above. "So those scallawags are goin' to try to do Charlie up to-night! Well, you can bet your life I'm going to be around when they try it on. If they get away with the goods, I'll agree to eat snowballs for the rest of my life."

He decided to say nothing to Unger about the matter, for the present at least; and then began to figure out how he not only would head the rascals off, but prove them guilty before the whole company of a despicable deed.

"It won't be Charlie who'll get it in the neck, but somebody else, and there'll be a pair of 'em," whereat he chuckled so loudly that Unger, who was standing near him at the moment, asked him what he was laughing at.

"I'm thinkin' of somethin' funny that's goin' to happen to-night," grinned his assistant.

"Let's hear about it," asked Unger curiously.

"Not on your life. A good thing will always keep. That's the way you worked it on me at the Metropolitan when you put those jobs up on Ranter and Chubb. You told me to keep my eyes skinned and I would see what I would see. S'pose you do the same 'round the beginnin' of the third act?"

"Come off, Billy; it won't do for you to work off any monkey-shines here."

"There isn't no monkey-shines in this, bet your life. It's something real serious."

"And you won't give the tip?"

"Not at this stage of the game."

"Well, Billy, I hope it's all right. You know I've quit larking for good. Also, please don't forget the important fact that I am your boss. So, if you don't want to have a run-in with me, you've got to be good."

CHAPTER VII.

WHICH SHOWS HOW THE CONSPIRACY FAILED.

There was a good house that night, and the first and second acts of "Fighting Fate" went off as smooth as silk.

The third act represented a rural landscape, with a set cottage at R. S. E., and a high bridge at back of stage, crossing from set rocks at U. E. R. and L.

As soon as the curtain had fallen on the climax of Act II, Charlie dropped his prompt book and rushed out on the stage, where he found Billy already removing the chairs and tables (furnished by the theater) used in the interior scene just finished.

As soon as the stage had been cleared, and a couple of stage hands had hauled up the interior back scene, reveal-

ing the landscape backing, and were substituting foliage wings for the interior dittos, Charlie and Billy ran out the cottage piece with its practicable door, and began to brace it to the stage with iron clamps.

This finished, they set the rock pieces and braced them, opened out the hinged bridge supports, and placed thereon the framework of the rustic bridge, the railing of which opened on hinges.

Everything was clamped into place, so as to make it perfectly solid in appearance and safe to cross upon.

The steadiness of the bridge depended on the double braces clamped to the stage behind the set rock pieces, and which held them upright.

There was other work for the boys to do before the curtain was rung up on the third act, but Charlie made it a rule to inspect the bridge a moment or so before he went to his post in the right proscenium entrance, where the prompter's shelf stood, and above which was the brass hook attached to the curtain signal wire.

Charlie was standing with his back to the curtain, looking over the scene to see that everything was properly arranged, when Briggs poked his head out of the wings and said:

"Ring up, Charlie."

Unger immediately ran up to the bridge, tested the clamps, and, finding everything all right, darted back to his post and gave the first warning pull to the curtain gong, following it immediately with two jerks, when the curtain man began to wind the rope on the windlass and the "drop" rose on an empty stage.

Tillie Jacobs, the singing and dancing soubrette, made her entrance from the cottage, and Douglas Barnum, heavy man, presently came on from L. S. E.

They had a scene together, and while they were speaking their lines Chubb joined Dudley Tripp at L. U. E. and handed him a monkey wrench, which he took from under his costume.

The two actors looked cautiously around them, but just then there was nobody near the upper entrances, which were close to the brick wall constituting the back of the theater.

Apparently satisfied that they were unobserved, Dudley, while Chubb kept watch, began to unscrew the bolts holding the clamps attached to the braces which kept the big set rock at L. U. E. in place.

He worked quickly and deftly, and soon had the four bolts in his hand.

He passed them with the wrench over to Chubb, who put the bolts in his pocket and shoved the wrench out of sight behind the corner of the back scene cloth.

Then he pushed the braces, which worked on hinges, quite close to the framework of the painted rock.

Dudley did not propose to touch the opposite rock, as Jenkins made his entrance from that side, and his "business" called for a quick, jerky dash over the bridge.

The moment the Dutch comedian passed the center of the span his weight would be brought to bear on the framework which had been tampered with.

The set-piece would yield at once to the strain, fall back-

ward, the end of the bridge would go down with a crash, and poor Jenkins would take a header through the upper entrance, at the imminent risk of a broken neck or broken bones.

It was a dastardly scheme.

But the two jealous and disgruntled actors only cared to achieve their own mean ends, without any consideration for the damage incurred thereby.

As they slipped away from the scene of their operations a small human being came shooting down a rope which hung from the staging in the flies.

It was Billy Duane, who had been a silent witness above of the crooked work on the stage, and he landed squarely in L. U. E.

He darted down to the O. P. proscenium entrance, where he saw Briggs standing talking to Howard Austin, the first juvenile.

"I want to speak to you a moment, Mr. Briggs," said the boy, in a low, hurried tone.

The stage manager saw by the lad's face that something was in the wind, and he said:

"Well, what is it, Billy?"

"I want you to come with me, sir."

Billy piloted him to L. U. E.

Chubb and Dudley Tripp were carelessly conversing in L. S. E., and paid no attention to them.

"Look here, Mr. Briggs," said Duane, pointing to the condition of the set rock. "If Jenkins was to cross the bridge now, what would happen?"

Briggs looked, and a frown gathered on his brow.

"How comes it in this shape?" he asked sternly. "Is this the way Charlie and you attend to business?"

"If we bungled things that way, you don't suppose I'd come and point it out to you, do you?"

"I don't know what you're getting at, Billy; but one thing is certain—you've got to fix it up right away. Why, Jenkins might break his neck the way that rock is standing."

"Sure he would. It was fixed on purpose so he would get a nasty fall, and Charlie and I would get blamed for it."

"Fixed! What do you mean? Has any one touched those braces since you put them in place, as it was your business and Charlie's to do?"

"Yes, sir."

Briggs looked hard at the boy.

That such an uncalled-for and reckless thing should be done by any one who had access to the stage seemed incredible.

It was a nasty piece of business, and Briggs was getting hot under the collar.

"Tell me what you know about it," he said sharply.

Without referring to the conversation he had overheard in the cellar, Billy said he happened to be up in the flies, and, looking down, saw Dudley Tripp and Chubb remove the bolts from the clamps.

"I guess Chubb has the bolts in his pockets yet, and I know he put the wrench behind this cloth."

Billy pulled aside the end of the back scene, and there, sure enough, in the narrow space between the roller and the brick wall lay the monkey wrench.

Just then Billy's sharp eyes observed Chubb disappear behind a framed bit of scenery tilted against the side wall of the theater.

"Chubb has walked under that garden piece just now, Mr. Briggs. I'll bet he's gone there to get rid of those bolts."

Briggs, without a word, darted over and looked into the space between the wall and the set piece.

Chubb had his back to him and was pulling the bolts out of his pocket and laying them on the floor.

The guilt of the comedian was beyond dispute, and Briggs, with a roar of anger, reached his arm in, hooked Chubb by the collar, and dragged him out.

Two of the bolts were still in his hand.

What he said to the startled actor as he glared fiercely down at him would not bear repetition in print.

Stage managers have the habit of expressing themselves pretty forcibly when things aren't coming their way, as many an actor and actress can testify; but when they are up against such a crooked game as Chubb and Tripp were engaged in, well—there aren't any words in the English language too strong to express their sentiments.

Dudley Tripp, Howard Austin, Jenkins, and Mrs. Benson, who played old woman parts, were attracted to the scene by the disturbance.

Chubb was livid and trembling with fear.

"What's the trouble, Briggs?" asked Jenkins, in great surprise.

"Trouble!" rasped the stage manager, holding up the low comedian by the neck, in spite of his squirming. "Go and look at what this skunk and Mr. Tripp have been doing in the bridge entrance. Then, if you want to knock the head off both of them, you've got my permission to do so."

"What's this you're saying about me?" demanded Dudley Tripp, loftily, as Billy took the Dutch comedian by the arm and marched him to where the set piece had been tampered with.

"You're a pretty individual to call yourself a respectable actor," replied Briggs, scornfully. "You—well, if I told you what I thought of you it would make your fur fly. It's a wonder you dare look me in the face."

"Pardon me, Mr. Briggs, but your insinuations are positively insulting," replied Dudley, with perfect composure.

"Are they? Well, let me tell you that you're an infernal scoundrel!"

"Sir! I shall report your language to Mr. Rickaby."

"After Mr. Rickaby hears what I have to say, with the proof to back it, I think you'll find it convenient to take your trunk and quit."

"Indeed!" sneered the leading man.

Bradley, who played a minor part, came up at this moment and said:

"You'll be wanted on the stage in a moment, Tripp."

"Thanks, Brad, old man," said Dudley, sauntering over to the entrance wing.

"Look at that," said Briggs, holding up one of Chubb's hands, the fingers of which still held two of the bolts, which he had seemed too paralyzed to drop. "Look at those bolts. The skunk took them out of the clamps that secured the braces of this end of the bridge. His object was to seriously injure Jenkins, because," the stage manager jumped at the correct conclusion, "he's jealous of the hit Jenkins has made with the show. Go and hide your head till you are wanted," he exclaimed, snatching the bolts away and giving the comedian a push.

Then he got the other bolts from behind the garden piece, carried them to where Billy was enlightening Jenkins as to the situation, and told the boy to refix the braces.

Jenkins, when he understood the affair, was a mighty angry actor, and swore he'd take it out of Chubb's hide after the show.

The other members of the company were so surprised at the developments that they were not convinced of the guilt of Chubb and Tripp until Billy told them his story at the end of the act.

After that the comedian and the leading man were studiously avoided off the stage for the rest of the night.

Billy told Charlie about the matter while they were clearing the stage and setting the next act, which was easy.

Unger was almost paralyzed.

"We'd been in a terrible scrape if you hadn't discovered their game," said Charlie, indignantly.

"I'll bet we would. Briggs would have believed we were careless, and hadn't bolted down those braces at all."

"I might have got fired."

"You'd have stood a good chance of it."

That night, after the show, Briggs told Mr. Rickaby.

The result was Chubbs and Tripp received notice to quit, and the manager telegraphed to town for two people to take their places.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW CHARLIE UNGER FALLS INTO THE HANDS OF DUDLEY TRIPP AND CHUBB.

"I guess your nose is out of joint, Charlie," remarked Billy, one day, with a grin, while they were hauling the trunks into the different dressing-rooms.

"How is that?"

"Why, Miss Vance seems to have taken a great shine to Frank Frost, our new leading man."

"Well, he's a nice fellow, all right," replied Charlie, in a resigned tone.

"He's a good actor, and he plays the B-flat cornet in the band to the queen's taste," said Billy, admiringly.

"The new low comedian is a fine clarinet player. He told me he took a fancy to the instrument after faking it in an old-time farce called 'The Wandering Minstrel.'"

"The cymbals and the bass drum is good enough for me," grinned Billy. "You're lucky you don't have to play in the band."

"As I can't perform on anything but a jew's-harp and a mouth harmonica, I wouldn't cut much of a figure in the musical bunch. Besides, I couldn't find time anyway. I am doing now as much as any ordinary full-grown man would care to tackle at twice the salary. There's one satisfaction, however, the 'ghost' walks regularly every Monday, so there's no kick coming from my respected ma. She gets a postoffice order every week, and that helps keep the pot boiling."

"How are the boarders?"

"She's catching the vaudeville people now, and gets her money, I guess, without trouble. It's the summer time that makes ma dizzy. Then a good many hams come around and try to stack her up for free grub; but she won't stand for that any more."

"I should say not," chuckled Billy.

"The Metropolitan Stock Company" had been out about six weeks, and had played to very fair business since it left town.

So far the company had laid off only one day, being unable to get time for a certain night within its radius of operation, for Manager Rickaby didn't care to take the chances of a long jump.

They were now in Sayville, which boasted two temples of amusement—the Opera House and Burt's Theatre.

"The Metropolitan Stock" was to show in Burt's that night; but as the advance sale had been pretty slim, owing to the superior features offered by the rival attraction at the Opera House, Manager Rickaby feared he would have a poor house.

On their way back to the hotel Charlie and Billy passed the stage door to the Opera House.

Two men came out and walked on ahead of them.

"Well," gasped Duane, clutching his companion by the arm, "if there aren't Chubb and Dudley Tripp, I'm a liar!"

"I guess you're right, Billy. They must have got an engagement with the company that is playing the house."

"Looks that way, doesn't it? I s'pose we'll meet 'em at the hotel."

"Maybe they're not stopping at the Winston House."

"Must be. All the profesh put up there."

"We don't have to notice them."

"Well, I should say not."

"They're lucky chaps to catch on with that show. I hear it's a good one."

"It's good enough to get on without a band."

"Where does it hail from. Did you hear?"

"Chicago. Been out two months."

"Chubb and Tripp are bound to crow over our people since they've got on to such a good thing."

"Sure they will. It's like 'em to do just that."

Manager Rickaby's fears were verified.

There was a very thin house at Burt's Theatre that

evening, while, on the contrary, the Opera House was packed to the doors.

To make matters worse, the manager of the opposition was an old business rival of Rickaby's.

Therefore, the head of the "Metropolitan Stock Company" felt decidedly sore when he counted the house that night, after a report of his opponent's success had been brought to him.

It was the poorest business the actors had played to since they left town, and it had a depressing effect on all hands.

After the show the performers resumed their street attire, packed their trunks, and returned to their hotel, leaving Charlie and Billy, as usual, to attend to the scenery and other property of the company.

Owing to the fact that the theatrical expressman had certain arrangements with the opposition company, Charlie found that the scenery, trunks, etc., would have to be shipped to the depot that night, and this meant an hour's extra labor for him and his assistant before they could hope to get to bed.

They worked like a pair of beavers, however, and with the assistance of the theatre stage hands, who gave them a generous lift, they got the stuff out of the house much sooner than they had expected.

While they were putting the last of the scenery on the truck, Charlie was astonished by the appearance of Estelle Vance at the stage door.

She was somewhat excited and out of breath.

"Why, Miss Vance, what has brought you back?" he asked her in surprise.

"I'm so glad," she said, with a little gasp, "that I've got here before you were gone, for we leave early in the morning, and I was afraid I shouldn't get another chance."

"Another chance for what?" asked Charlie, wonderingly.

"To go back to my dressing-room."

"Why do you want to go back there?"

"I left a ring that I prize very much—it was my mother's—on the shelf in front of the mirror. I must get it."

"Well, it's all dark upstairs. If you'll wait a minute I'll go up with you."

"Oh, it isn't necessary to trouble you. I'll take the watchman's lantern. I know the way, all right. I'll be down in a minute."

"Well, I'll meet you on the stage at the foot of the stairs," replied the boy, as the little actress seized the lantern from the shelf in the doorkeeper's box and tripped off into the dark and silent theatre.

Her only guide was a dim wired gas jet at the end of the passage leading to the stage, and another near the stairway which led to the ladies' dressing-rooms located up in the region of the flies.

"You go on with the truck, Billy," directed the young master of properties. "I've got to see Miss Vance back to the hotel."

"All right," returned his assistant, cheerfully, as the last set piece was put on the wagon and roped down to keep it in place.

Then the wagon drove off.

The watchman recharged his pipe and sat on his stool to wait for Charlie, who had started back into the building, to return with Estelle.

At that moment two smoothly shaven men, one tall and the other short, walked in at the stage door, and as the watchman started to accost them they pounced upon him, bound and gagged him, and pushing him into a corner of his little den, darted off down the passage toward the stage.

"We're in great luck," said the short man, whose voice was the voice of Chubb, the comedian. "I was beginning to be afraid we should not be able to bag our game. Instead of going with the truck he came back in here. Must have forgotten something. At any rate, he's played right into our hands."

"That's what he has," replied his companion, Dudley Tripp.

"I wonder where he is," breathed Chubb, when they entered on the dark stage.

"We'll wait here till he starts to go out."

"I hear him moving about behind the wings. We'd better tackle him at once."

"All right," agreed Tripp, and they started forward.

Charlie heard them coming, and thinking it was the watchman, he called out:

"Is that you, Barney?"

There was no reply, but still the footsteps—and he noticed there were more than one pair of feet—advanced.

"Who's there?"

Still no answer.

Charlie left his position at the foot of the stairway, where he had been impatiently awaiting Miss Vance's return, and walked to the wings.

Two figures, indistinct in the semi-gloom, came suddenly upon him.

Before he had any idea what was going to happen he was seized, an uncorked bottle pressed under his nose, and he found himself for the instant helpless.

A subtle essence ascended into his nostrils and his head began to swim.

He couldn't recognize his assailants, but a sense of danger caused him to make a desperate struggle to throw the men off.

He was a strong boy, and very determined when aroused. The men did not expect to find him so hard to manage, and in the struggle the bottle was dashed to the floor and smashed.

"Confusion!" exclaimed Dudley Tripp. "The bottle is gone!"

Charlie knew his voice in a moment.

"Dudley Tripp!" he exclaimed, "what is the meaning of this?"

"Ha! You know me, eh?" cried the actor, in some vexation. "Well, it doesn't matter. We'll fix you, any way, in a couple of minutes, so you won't cross our path again, I promise you."

CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH CHARLIE UNGER PROVES HIMSELF A HERO.

"What do you mean?" demanded Unger, after they had completely subdued him by their united strength.

"You'll find out what we mean in a jiffy. Won't he, Chubb?"

"Well, I guess," replied the comedian, with a laugh.

"You're a nice pair of scoundrels, you are," said Charlie, scornfully.

"You might as well spare your words," replied Tripp, through his teeth. "It won't do you any good. I'll hold on to him, Chubb, while you hunt a bit of rope up. You ought to be able to find some hanging about."

Chubb started off to look up the required article, and Charlie heard him strike several matches, one after another, to aid him in his quest.

Dudley maintained a tight grip on the boy.

Charlie had stopped struggling when he found his efforts unavailing, and waited to regain his breath.

Now that he was alone with Dudley Tripp, he thought he saw his advantage, and was preparing to make a desperate attempt to free himself when a slight noise, followed by a low cry, and then a loud crash, came down from the "flies."

"What's that?" exclaimed Tripp, clearly startled.

Charlie was sure something had happened to Estelle Vance, and he tore himself loose from the actor's partially released grasp.

Pushing Dudley back, he darted for the stairs.

"He's got away!" cried the leading man, starting to follow the boy. "Head him off, Chubb!"

The comedian, who had also been startled by the sound from above, turned and saw the point Unger was making for.

He intercepted him just as he was putting his feet on the steps.

"Stand back, you villain!" cried Charlie, aiming a blow at Chubb's face.

The comedian dodged, and then caught the boy about the waist.

They swayed back and forth along the wall.

"Let me go, will you!" roared Unger, struggling with all his might.

"Not on your life! We've got you now, and we're going to give you a dressing down you won't forget as long as you live."

"You cowards! Two to one!"

"Shut up!"

"Hold him tight, till I can get my arms about him again," said Dudley, coming up, and watching his chance to grab the swaying form of the boy.

Charlie heard him, and knew it would be all up with him as soon as Tripp could get a firm hold on him again.

So he made a desperate effort to shake off Chubb.

The result of it was they tripped up and fell against a stack of old, musty wings tilted against the wall.

Locked in each other's arms, they crashed through the rotten canvas, dislodging the pile, which fell over and struck the gas jet, crushing in the wire guard and bringing the flame into contact with the painted surface of the canvas.

Dudley, in his eagerness to lay hold of Unger by the legs, for the boy was on top of Chubb, who, half smothered by the cloud of dust and splinters, had let go of him, did not notice the peril that threatened the house.

Nor did he observe a bright light which had suddenly sprung up above in the flies near the painter's scaffold.

"I've got him, Chubb!" exclaimed Tripp, at length, as he got a good grip on the boy's trouser legs and began to pull Unger off the comedian.

This move on his part jarred the pile of scenery still more, and one of the wings, all in a blaze at the top, fell over against the stairs leading to the dressing-rooms.

A second and a third wing had caught, and the illumination called Dudley's attention to the dangerous situation.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated, in alarm. "The house will be on fire in a minute!"

He gave a final jerk to Unger's legs, pulling him clear of Chubb, who then came crawling out of the mass of fractured wood and canvas.

Another blazing wing fell over on the stairs, and bits of the burning canvas dropped down through the openings in the steps and ignited a pile of gauze stuff which somebody had chucked under there out of sight, and afterward had neglected to remove.

In an instant the material started into a blaze, caught on the stairs, which were like so much tinder, for the theatre was an old one—the first which had been erected in the town—and in an incredibly short time that end of the building was a seething mass of flames.

"The place is afire!" cried Chubb, in a terror-stricken voice, as he scrambled to his feet.

"Curse the luck!" gritted Dudley, letting go of Unger. "We'll have to skip out if we want to save ourselves. This old barn will be on fire from cellar to roof in ten minutes."

"Look above!" yelled the comedian, with bulging eyes and chattering teeth. "The 'flies' are on fire, too!"

"Great heaven!" almost screamed Charlie, as the two actors, leaving the boy to his own resources, started for the passage leading out to the stage door. "Come back. If you are men you will help me save Miss Vance!"

"What's that?" replied Dudley, pausing half way to the door.

"Estelle Vance is up in her dressing-room. She will be burned to death. For heaven's sake, do something to help her!" And Charlie made a dash for the blazing stairway, but was stopped by the rush of the flames which the draft from the door, through which the frightened comedian had just fled, forced into his face.

"Nonsense!" returned Dudley. "She must have gone long ago. In fact, I saw her going up the street with Tillie Jacobs."

"She came back for something she forgot in her room, and hasn't come down yet."

Dudley hesitated.

He had a sneaking regard for the beautiful and talented little leading woman, and the idea that she was now in peril of her life appealed to his better nature.

But when he glanced at the blazing stairway, through which it seemed impossible for anyone to force his way, and then took a look at the spreading flames in the flies, the hopelessness of any successful attempt to reach the dressing-rooms and return to the stage alive, as well as his personal regard for his own safety, overcame every consideration for the girl's desperate position.

"No use," he replied to Charlie's entreaties. "If she's up there now, we can't do a thing for her. I'm off to give the alarm."

He turned and disappeared through the passage, stopping only long enough at the stage door to release the watchman and inform him that the theatre was on fire.

"Cowardly villain!" cried Unger, making another dash at the stairs, in a mad attempt to ascend them, only to be driven back, scorched and panting.

The fire was now well under way, and the stage was filling with smoke, which caused the boy to cough and his eyes to smart.

But not for one moment did he think of deserting Estelle Vance.

Had he not been so excited he might have wondered why no sound came from the imperiled girl.

Not a cry nor a scream had indicated that she knew of the danger which threatened her, and it seemed impossible she could not but be aware of the fact.

The only sound was the crackling of the fire and the dropping bits of blazing wood on the stage from above.

Charlie, as he glanced up, could see the lurid tongues of flame eating their way among the ropes and pulleys and reaching out for the sky borders.

"I can't get up those stairs!" he cried, desperately. "She is lost! She is lost!"

The end of a long rope, released from above, struck the boy in the face as it fell.

Mechanically he grabbed it, and as he did so a thrilling and desperate resolution flashed through his brain.

He would climb up that rope and thus gain the burning region above.

Perhaps by quick action he might reach and save the girl yet.

He tested the rope and found the other end secure.

Then, without wasting a moment more than to tie his handkerchief over his mouth and nostrils, he began to haul himself up hand over hand through the drifting smoke that was thickening the atmosphere of the stage and filtering out into the body of the house.

Up and up he went, with all the agility of a sailor, until he reached a beam that afforded a foothold.

The fire was spreading all around him.

It was a terrifying spectacle, but Charlie, doggedly bent on his purpose, regarded it not.

Throwing himself on his hands and knees, the boy crawled forward, half dizzy from the lack of pure air.

In spite of the smoke he could see fairly well up here, for the fire had got to the space above the proscenium arch, over the curtain, and was blazing hot and furiously amid the dry, tinder-like woodwork, throwing a bright glare over the upper regions of the stage.

As he reached a spot half way between the painter's staging and the top of the burning stairs he came suddenly on the unconscious form of Estelle Vance, stretched out with one arm extended at full length.

She had evidently missed her way in the gloom, in spite of the lantern she had carried, and, making a misstep, had fallen, striking her head against a box used to simulate the sound of thunder.

The lantern had flown from her hand, smashed against a pile of painting material, and ignited some of the inflammable stuff gathered there.

That was the origin of the blaze above, the most formidable of the two.

Estelle's face looked white as death in the lurid gleam of the burning surroundings, and a tiny stream of blood trickled from a slight wound over her temple.

"My heavens!" gasped Charlie. "She can't be dead!"

That was no time to decide the question.

Every moment was precious.

He gathered the girl in his arms and started for the rope by which he had come up.

He intended to make a rapid slide to the stage with his burden, and escape by the stage door.

But, to his horror and despair, he found the way to the rope cut off, and even the beam to which the rope hung was on fire, and burning so furiously that had he been able to reach the rope there was small chance the support would stand the double weight of himself and his unconscious burden.

"I must have air, or I shall drop!" he groaned.

With desperate energy, holding Miss Vance firmly around the waist, he staggered over to the brick wall.

The sliding bar which held the shutters was rusty from disuse.

This fact he found out when he raised the lower sash of the window.

But two lives were at stake, and the boy tugged and pulled till he dislodged the bar from its iron rest.

Then he threw all his force against the shutters.

They swung open with a harsh clang, and he fell limply across the sill, in full view of the crowd already gathered in the street below.

CHAPTER X.

WHEREIN CHARLIE AND ESTELLE VANCE ESCAPE WITH THEIR LIVES.

A hoarse shout of surprise and consternation went up from the mob of people whom the fire had, in spite of the lateness of the hour, collected around the scene of the conflagration, when the clang of the iron shutters near

the top of the brick wall disclosed the fact that there was a human being in the burning theatre.

The flames then were rising high above the roof of the building, lighting up the neighborhood around about and casting a lurid glow into the heavens that could be seen miles away.

The fire engines were now arriving on the scene, and the policemen were beginning to drive the early arrivals back to where a fire line would be established.

The occupants of the houses opposite, mostly floors let out to the workmen of an adjacent factory, were in a state of terror and confusion.

Some of them were looking at the blaze from the windows and the roofs, but the women were scurrying around inside gathering up their trinkets and valuables in preparation for speedy departure if that became necessary.

Charlie Unger breathed the pure air into his lungs and soon recovered his coolness, which was second nature with him in the face of danger.

He stooped down, lifted Estelle in his arms, and laid her face down across the window sill.

The crowd, which had become still after that first outburst, and was watching his every action with the liveliest interest and anxiety, now roared again when they saw that another person, and a woman at that, was up there in the doomed building.

Every window in the apartments of the opposite houses was peopled at once.

Women gazed up at the imperiled pair, and turned faint, while ejaculations of pity and horror were to be heard on every side.

"They're lost!"

"Merciful heaven, have pity on them!"

"Must they perish in that dreadful manner?"

"Is there no way to save them?"

These were some of the words that fell from ashen and trembling lips of both the men and women eyewitnesses.

Some shouted for the hose, others for ladders; others still, for ropes.

The hook and ladder company had arrived, and ladders were being brought, but no single ladder would reach the imperiled ones, so the firemen set about joining them.

Firemen also appeared on the roofs of the adjoining buildings with hose and axes and pikes.

The boy was thankful that Estelle was not conscious of her awful position.

The heat was now growing almost unbearable around him.

The flames were creeping toward him over the floor and on the beams above, as if eager for the prey that seemed unable to elude their blighting touch.

At this exciting point some men, who had been cool and wide-awake to the situation, appeared on the roof opposite with a long ladder.

The window where Charlie and his helpless friend were lay on a level with this roof.

The street was a narrow one, and the would-be rescuers, after measuring the intervening space with their eyes,

calculated the ladder was long enough to span the gulf between.

So, with plenty of help at their back, they shoved the ladder out, with a rope attached to the forward end, which they managed to toss to the firemen on the roof next to the theatre.

The crowd of spectators, perceiving their object, raised a great shout of satisfaction, and then became quiet and anxious once more.

A fireman backed up against the side wall of the theatre, another climbed on his shoulders, and a third was boosted up till he managed to shin up the body of the second man and reached and pulled himself on top of the blazing building.

The rope attached to the end of the ladder was thrown to him.

He carried it around to a point above the window where Charlie stood, and then yelled to the men with the ladder to haul it back and cast off the rope.

They obeyed, and the rope fell against the theatre wall, and within reach of Unger, as a second fireman joined his comrade on the roof.

It seemed now as if the rescue would be effected, and another roar of satisfaction and encouragement rose from the crowd at both ends of the street.

As Charley reached for the rope a tremendous cloud of thick smoke came rolling out of the window, hiding him from the view of everybody.

As it floated away partially it was seen that the boy and the young woman had disappeared, and in their places came a lurid sheet of flame, which lapped up the window frames, sills, and every inch of the woodwork, the crackling glass falling to the pavement in a shower of glittering fragments.

A groan of horror came from the crowd.

"They are gone!"

Women covered their faces with their hands, and wept.

The excitement was intense, and above it all came the roaring of the fire through the roof and within the theatre, the puffing of the steamers at the corners, as they forced the water through the hose, and the swish of the streams as they struck and played upon the blazing window where a moment before two human lives had mutely appealed for help.

Clang! Bang!

Another pair of shutters had opened further along the building, and Charlie appeared again before the public view.

A cheer of intense relief rang out upon the night air.

The crowd was thrilled with delight and satisfaction at his providential escape.

Now it was seen that the girl had recovered her senses. She was clinging to Unger, as though terrified at her perilous position.

The firemen on the roof made their way slowly forward so as to take up their position above the other window.

"Brace up, Miss Vance!" said Charlie, in a voice of

encouragement. "The firemen are on the roof and will soon have you out by means of a rope."

"Oh, it is dreadful!" she cried, shivering like a leaf.

"Yes, it's pretty tough." But I'm satisfied if I get you out of it all right. Here comes the rope!"

He grabbed it, wound it twice about the girl's waist and knotted it securely.

"Now hold on tight!" he said; and leaning out of the window, gave the firemen the signal to haul up.

As the rope tightened he steadied her so that she swung clear all right.

Then the big crowd roared its approval as the girl was drawn safely to the roof.

"I hope they'll hurry," muttered Unger. "The fire is getting awful close. This is my last chance. Phew! It's hot enough to roast an ox!"

Down came the rope again.

"Just in time!" he breathed, for the fire was burning the boards at his very feet, and as he finished attaching the rope under his arms his trousers caught, and the crowd could see the cloth burning as he was pulled up to safety.

The crowd cheered again, this time long and loud, for the flames had been cheated of their victims, who were being hurried from the burning roof by the firemen.

Fifteen minutes later the roof fell in, and the flames and sparks rose a hundred feet into the air; but the two lives had been saved, and everybody was satisfied.

CHAPTER XI.

WHEREIN CHARLIE IS SLATED FOR AN IMPORTANT JOB.

"Oh, Charlie, how shall I ever thank you enough for saving me from that fearful fire?" cried Estelle Vance, half an hour later, when they sat in the parlor of the hotel, three o'clock in the morning though it was, and the boy had finished telling her how he had climbed the rope to the "flies" in her behalf, and found her dead to all the world, as it were, upon the boards where she had fallen.

"I am sufficiently repaid in knowing that I did save you, in spite of the difficulties I had to encounter to do it."

"And you faced almost certain death just to save me?"

"Why not? Are you not worth it?"

"You brave—brave, unselfish boy!"

And then she impulsively threw her arms about his neck and kissed him twice upon the lips, and clung to him while she cried.

"And may I kiss you once?" he asked, wistfully.

"Why, of course you may. I shall love you as long as I live!"

Did he kiss her?

Well, say—he forgot he had asked only one, and in his confusion he kissed her three times.

He certainly had earned those kisses, for it had been touch and go with them both.

Of course, Charlie was the hero of the company next day, and for many days after.

Everybody had something nice to say to him.

Unger's statement to the town authorities of the attack made upon him in the theatre by Dudley Tripp and Chubb, as one of the causes which led to the destruction of Burt's theatre, resulted in the issuance of a warrant for the arrest of the two actors; but they, taking time by the forelock, skipped out of Sayville before morning, and their whereabouts could not be ascertained.

When the company arrived at their next destination, about noon, the first thing Miss Vance did was to go to a jeweler's and buy him a nice little gold watch and chain.

It took the biggest part of a week's salary, but what did that matter?

Money had no value in comparison with her life, and the girl was truly grateful.

"You're all to the good, Charlie, old boy," said Billy, that afternoon. "I wouldn't have gone through what you did for a gold mine."

"I wasn't thinking of gold mines; I was thinking of Estelle Vance."

"You ought to marry her, to make things come out like they do in the story books."

"I wouldn't mind, one of these days, if I had the chance," replied Unger, thinking of the two kisses the girl had given him, not to speak of the three he had taken himself, and wondering how he had summoned up nerve enough to ask for them. "But I am afraid I am not in it. There is a big difference between a talented young leading woman and a common master of properties like myself."

"Ho! I don't know. You're as smart as they come, Charlie. You won't be a property man all your life, bet your boots. I expect to see you the manager of a show yet."

"That's what I'm aiming for. I'm picking up experience fast, thank goodness. I mean to get there just as quick as the law will allow."

"Well," grinned Billy, "if I get to be a manager, I guess it won't be any higher than a medicine show."

"How about an 'Uncle Tom's Cabin Combination?'" smiled Unger.

"That would suit me all right. I'd like to have Tillie Jacobs for Topsy."

"So you're sweet on Tillie?"

"Oh, I like her some. She's just my style, if you want to know."

"Tillie is a bright little girl."

"Bet your boots she is!"

"And a great friend of Estelle Vance's."

"So much the better. It would be fine if you and me married the two of 'em."

"Stranger things than that have happened, though I'm afraid there isn't much danger that we will connect in this case."

"It was mighty lucky we got the trunks and the other stuff out of the theatre before the fire."

"You're right, it was."

"If it hadn't been that the expressman couldn't haul it next morning in time for the train, owing to his arrangements with the Chicago company, we should have been a busted show about this time, and en route for town."

Whether or not the fire was a bad omen, certain it is the company struck bad business in earnest after leaving Sayville.

The show—a St. Louis aggregation—which filled the dates on the same route ahead of them, took all the money in sight, leaving the pickings to Rickaby, and the pickings in question didn't amount to a hill of beans.

"We're having a run of all-around hard luck," remarked Billy, as he and Unger were doing their usual stunt with the trunks and properties of the company in the small town of Sabine. "I was around in front, and heard the manager of the house tell Rickaby that they hadn't sold two seats in advance."

"That isn't encouraging. I'm afraid the 'ghost' will soon forget to come our way, which will be a pretty bad sign."

"I should snicker. Do you think that fire queered us?"

"Why should it?" asked Charlie, in surprise.

"That's Jenkins's opinion, and Barnum, the heavy man, agreed with him."

"All rot!"

"That's what I think. But the profesh is awful superstitious. Briggs carries a gold-mounted rabbit's foot in his pocket, and Rickaby has got some kind of fetish attached to his watch chain. And don't say a word, Tillie Jacobs put her stockings on inside out by mistake, in her hurry to get dressed for breakfast, and I heard her tell Mrs. Benson it was bad luck to change 'em during the day."

"Then I suppose Tillie thinks the fire was a hoodoo?" grinned Charlie.

"That's what she does. She's sure of it."

"Now I know why Chubb had a horseshoe nailed to his trunk. It was for luck."

"Sure it was. It didn't bring him much. He was so crooked that luck wouldn't stick to him even with Giant cement."

"I wonder if that four-leaved clover pendant on Miss Vance's watch chain is a charm, too?"

"Cert. Just notice sometime at the table if you see any of the company spill the salt. Whoever does it will take up the spilt grains and throw them over his right shoulder."

"What do they do that for?"

"To avoid a scrap with somebody. Salt spilt at table is a warning of a quarrel."

"I must have spilt some salt the day I had the run-in with Dudley Tripp," grinned Charlie, as he laid down his end of the last trunk.

"I'll bet you did," replied Billy, taking out a cigarette and lighting it.

When they reached the hotel they saw Manager Rickaby talking very earnestly with Stage Manager Briggs.

Briggs motioned Unger to approach.

"Look here, Charlie," said Rickaby, "I'm thinking of giving you a new job."

"A new job!" exclaimed the boy, in some surprise.

"Yes. I've kept a line on you since you've been with the show, and am bound to say you're the hardest and most conscientious worker we have. You've kept your word to do your best, and Briggs says you've kept it clear up to the handle, and even beyond. He says you're all to the good, and I agree with him. Now I'm in a hole, and I'm going to look to you to help pull me out of it."

"Well, if you think I can help you in any way, I'm ready to start in and——"

"Hustle, eh?"

"Though I think I've been doing that right along."

"So you have. That's why I think you may answer at a pinch to go ahead of the show as advance agent."

"Go ahead of the show, sir?" almost gasped Charlie.

"Yes."

"What's the matter with Bulgin?"

"Taken down sick with pneumonia and sent to the hospital in Salamanca. I want you to take his place till he gets on his pins again. You're a smart, bright boy, and a hustler from A to Z. Briggs and I will coach you right away as to your duties, and what you'll be up against. If you make good, maybe I'll keep you as my regular advance man, anyway, as I'm not particularly satisfied with Bulgin's work. How does this strike you?"

"It strikes me just about right, sir. I'm on the lookout to better myself, and I think I'll take to advance work like a duck to water," said the boy, enthusiastically.

"I hope you will. It'll put you ahead in the business."

And so it was settled that Unger was to go ahead of the show, starting next morning for Salamanca, which Bulgin hadn't billed yet.

CHAPTER XII.

IN WHICH CHARLIE GOES AHEAD OF THE SHOW.

Mr. Rickaby took Charlie into an unoccupied corner of the reading room of the hotel and proceeded to give him the benefit of his own many years' experience as an advance agent.

"You'll find what's left of Bulgin's outfit at the Spencer House in Salamanca," he continued, puffing away at his cigar. "His route book, memorandum agreements with managers, press notices to be inserted in the papers, complimentary passes, etc. Our paper you'll find at the express office. I will give you a written paper of general instructions, as you are liable to forget a part of my verbal ones. Of course, I can't tell you everything. A good deal will depend on your own judgment. I want the towns thoroughly billed. In Salamanca there is a regular bill-posting firm, but in most of the small towns, where we have time, you'll find that the proprietor, or someone connected with the theatre, has the bill-posting privilege. Who-

ever it is, you'll have to arrange with him on the best terms you can make, leaving your signed order to collect on the night of the show. Get your lithos and photos into the most desirable stores. You ought to have some idea of their character, for you and Billy have collected the photo stands as we went along."

"Yes, sir," replied Charlie, promptly.

"Well, that's all. You can go and talk to Briggs now. He may be able to put you next to some points I have overlooked. You will start out with the theory of advance work. It's up to you to round it out by experience. I think in time you will make a good advance man."

Briggs talked to him for half an hour, and then Charlie went in to supper.

He found Billy waiting for him, for they always sat together at table.

"What's in the wind, old man?" asked Duane, curiously.

"Oh, nothing much," grinned Charlie, "except you are going to take my place as master of the properties."

"Take your place!" gasped Billy; "and what are you going to do?"

"I'm going ahead in Bulgin's place."

"You don't mean it!"

"I do mean it. Everything is arranged. I leave in the morning for Salamanca."

While they were eating, Charlie gave his friend an outline of the situation.

"I'm dead sorry to lose you, Charlie. I shall feel like a fish out of water. I don't know how I'm going to wrestle with the scenery and other stuff all by my lonesome."

"Briggs will arrange all that. You do your best. That's all that can be expected of you."

The members of the company, Estelle Vance in particular, expressed their regret at losing him.

"I feel as if I were parting from the only true friend I have," said the girl, soberly.

"Oh, you have Mr. Frost, you know," replied Charlie, with a little jealous pang.

"Mr. Frost is nothing to me, Charlie," she answered, earnestly.

"Then you really think a little something of me, do you, Estelle?"

"Of course I do," she said, with tears starting into her eyes. "You have saved my life twice in four months. Do you think I could for a moment be indifferent——"

"Estelle!" cried the boy, eagerly, as he took her hand in his, "do you know why I risked my life to save you from death in Burt's Theatre? It's because I think the world of you. I have learned to care for you as a dear sister—as more than a sister, even. I am only a boy yet, it is true, in years, but I feel like a man in energy, ambition and the will to succeed. It is also true that you are a year older than I. Will that be a bar to the hope I have of one day making you my wife?"

"Charlie!"

"I don't ask you to promise me now more than a fighting chance to win you. Give me that assurance and I shall

go in and win out. When I am manager of a successful show, with you at the head of the cast, I want to marry you. I can't accomplish all that in a day, you know, but I am on the road to it now—I am going to succeed, mark my words, and I want you to share that success with me. Promise me you will give me the chance I ask for. That you will give me the opportunity to win you for myself."

The girl bent her head and murmured:

"Yes, Charlie. I promise."

On the following afternoon, late, Unger stepped off the eastbound express at the thriving town of Salamanca and went directly to the Spencer House.

He presented Manager Rickaby's letter to the proprietor of the hotel and was put in possession of Bulgin's effects.

He took charge of all the company's property, and the advance man's personal duds he locked up in his grip and sent to the hospital authorities, with a request to deliver it to Bulgin when that gentleman was discharged cured.

Next morning Charlie went over to the Opera House and introduced himself to the local manager.

He made all necessary arrangements for the company, filling out a contract in duplicate and substituting his own name for William Bulgin's printed at the head of the paper.

The manager was to furnish the Opera House (heated, lighted and cleaned), the license, orchestra, stage men, ushers, stage furniture, bill posting, newspaper advertisements, ticket sellers, special police, reserved seat tickets, house programs, etc.

A copy of the above memorandum agreement Charlie mailed to Mr. Rickaby, together with a memo. of the agreement with the hotel man, and such other information as he deemed necessary to communicate to the manager of the company.

He found a C. O. D. package at the express office, containing the paper to be billed and otherwise distributed, and had it sent to the theatre.

He hired a light rig and toured the town, putting out his lithographs, and in certain prominent stores, where he obtained permission, the photo stands.

In every case he left one or more complimentary tickets as payment for the privilege extended.

Then he visited the local paper offices and put it up to the editors in his most winning way, furnishing them with proofs of notices.

He took occasion to call their attention to the beauty and great histrionic ability of Estelle Vance, and dwelt upon her recent wonderful escape from death in the burning theatre at Sayville, and he did not forget to ring in the curtain incident at the Metropolitan in town, but, of course, his own connection with the affair was kept strictly in the background.

"Fighting Fate," he said, glibly, "is the greatest melodrama on the road. It is full of thrilling situations and climaxes, and its comedy element is the best ever. There are specialties in it to burn, and we carry a carload of

special scenery painted expressly for this mammoth production."

Charlie, on his own responsibility, had a transparency painted, on which the name of the play and Miss Vance were specially featured.

He made an arrangement with an expressman to tour the main streets of the town with the transparency illuminated, on the two nights which intervened before the company arrived, and gave him an order on Rickaby for his money.

He also put into practice several other original devices of his own for arousing public attention to his show, and when he finally shook the dust of Salamanca from his shoes he was satisfied he had acquitted himself as well as could reasonably be expected of one as inexperienced in the business as himself.

At any rate, he found there was no kick coming after the company had played the town, for they had the first bang-up house—the standing room only sign being displayed at the door a few minutes before eight—they had had in two weeks.

In fact, Charlie received a brief congratulatory telegram from Manager Rickaby which concluded with the words: "You're all to the good."

CHAPTER XIII.

WHEREIN DUDLEY TRIPP AND CHUBB BOB UP SERENELY.

One morning Charlie Unger arrived at a large town called Phalanx.

He registered at the leading hotel and had breakfast.

Then he started out to do business.

The first thing he wanted to know was what kind of a show immediately preceded his own company.

The Opera House was only a block away, but before he reached it he noticed a familiar lithograph in a music store window, and it didn't make him feel any too good to find that he was up against the St. Louis aggregation once more.

That company, which was presenting a musical farce called "A Hot Old Time," played the town on the following evening, the night before the "Metropolitan Stock Company" was to appear in "Fighting Fate."

It had been Rickaby's experience, so far, that wherever the St. Louis combination cut in immediately ahead of him he came in for the short end of the receipts.

In fact, "A Hot Old Time," with its skirt dancers, song-and-dance artists, and utterly ridiculous situations, had almost done up the legitimate melodrama of "Fighting Fate."

Charlie had ascribed a good deal of his luck in landing good houses for his manager to the fact that their dates, since striking Salamanca, did not bring them into competition with their winning rival.

"By George!" he ejaculated, as he stood and gazed at the

obnoxious bill, which represented a dashing young woman in rainbow-tinted skirts whirling about on the points of her toes, with the legend in big letters, "Dottie Dimple in 'A Hot Old Time,'" "I'm up against it at last. This show is making a raft of money, while we are scratching hard to make ends meet. 'A Hot Old Time' seems to leave a frost in its wake. Bulgin couldn't make any headway against it, and Bulgin is an experienced advance man, while I—oh, well, I'm not going to get discouraged at the first real snag I find in my way. The St. Louis company has the right to the billboards until nine o'clock to-morrow night; that'll give us just twenty-four hours' billing, but I can get my lithos, photos and small printing out, anyway, also my newspaper advertising and notices into the papers. The great trouble is the people appear to take kindly to this vaudeville rot. Probably it's the first thing of the kind that's been through this section for some time, and it draws as a novelty. They don't know what they miss when they turn down 'Fighting Fate.'"

So Charlie got a move on.

He called on the local manager first thing and made his arrangements.

Then he got his paper from the express office and sent the posters to the man who did the bill sticking, who promised to set his two men at work at nine o'clock next night.

By the time he had made the rounds of the newspapers and looked in at a number of places to see that the man employed distributing his quarter-sheet hangers and other small bills was attending to his work properly, it was time for him to return to the hotel for lunch.

It took him the larger part of the afternoon to get his window advertising about town, and he found he could get his lithos in stores that wouldn't stand for the pictures of "A Hot Old Time."

Bulgin had secured the same advantage, but it didn't offset to any extent the success reaped by the St. Louis show.

"I wish I could think of some way to take the wind out of the sails of this farce-comedy. It has had the inner track of us long enough, and it would be a big feather in my hat if I could fix things so as to draw a good house for Rickaby on top of 'A Hot Old Time.'"

So interested was he in the idea of doing up the opposition show if he could that he failed to notice two persons approaching along the sidewalk, until he actually butted into them.

"What in thunder do you mean, fellow!" exclaimed a voice, which sounded familiar to him.

"Yes, can't you look where you are walking?" cried the other man, angrily.

Then, as Charlie looked up, and began an apology, which, as he recognized Dudley Tripp and Chubb, the comedian, froze on his lips, the two actors simultaneously uttered exclamations of surprise and perhaps dismay.

"You here!" said the former leading man of the "Metropolitan Stock Company."

"Yes. And I see you're here, too—you and Mr. Chubb," replied Unger, coolly.

"Sure we are," remarked the comedian, with a ghastly grin.

"What are you doing in Phalanx?" asked Dudley, with a frown. "Rickaby's barnstormers aren't in town. Has the combination gone up salt river?"

"I might also ask what you two are doing in Phalanx," retorted the boy, without noticing the sneering innuendo.

"Oh, it's a free country," answered Chubb, flippantly, taking out a pack of cigarettes and selecting one. "Have a coffin nail?" proffering his bunch.

"Thank you, I don't smoke," replied Unger, coldly.

"Oh, don't you?" carelessly.

"I'd like to know what you gentlemen have to say for yourselves after that rough-house game you worked on me in the theatre at Sayville, and which ended in the destruction of the playhouse?" asked Charlie, in a stern tone.

The two actors looked at each other uneasily.

"That was only a little joke on our part, Unger," said Dudley, with assumed cordiality.

"That's right," chipped in Chubb, glibly. "You queered us with Rickaby, you know, and Dud and I thought we'd give you the razzle dazzle—kind of scare you. We didn't intend to hurt you."

"It looked to me like a pretty serious kind of joke. At any rate it turned out to be so. Why didn't you stay and face the music if you didn't mean any harm?"

"Face what music?" sneered Dudley.

"There was an investigation into the cause of the fire. You two couldn't be found, and so there were warrants issued for your arrest. If you ever go back to Sayville they will be served on you."

"Oh, we shan't go back," grinned the comedian.

"But you're still in the State. If the Sayville authorities knew you were in Phalanx they'd have you detained till they could send after you."

The actors looked a bit uneasy at hearing this.

"They won't know we're here unless you——"

"What do we care?" interrupted Chubb. "We won't be in town fifteen minutes from now. Come on, Dud, let's be moving. Ta! ta! Unger! We'll see you later."

Chubb hailed an electric car, which Charlie saw bore the name of a neighboring town—Dundee—and the two rascals were soon speeding away.

"I wonder what they're doing in this neighborhood," mused the boy. "They must have joined a show that probably is playing in Dundee to-night. Well, as long as they let me alone I shan't bother them."

Charlie went on to the hotel and wrote a couple of letters.

After that he spent half an hour cudgeling his brains for some scheme to get the better of the St. Louis combination, but he couldn't think of anything worth while.

He was first at the dinner table, as he intended to take the 5.55 accommodation for Pittston.

While he was paying his bill he suddenly recollected he had forgotten to call the attention of the manager of the

Opera House to a certain important fact in connection with the play of "Fighting Fate."

So he started off, grip in hand, to leave word at the box office.

As he was about to enter the theatre a smart-looking, dapper-dressed man, who had been standing negligently at one side of the entrance, looked at him sharply, then stepped forward and intercepted him.

"You're Mr. Unger, I believe, advance agent for the 'Metropolitan Stock,'" extending his hand, with an insinuating smile.

"Yes, sir; but you have the advantage of me," replied Charlie, pleasantly.

"Oh, I'm Sid Rex, of 'A Hot Old Time.' Glad to meet you. Come across the way and have a drink," and he linked his arm in Unger's.

"You'll have to excuse me. I don't drink."

"Don't drink, eh?" exclaimed Mr. Rex, in some astonishment. "Come, now, you're joking."

"No, sir; I'm not joking. I drink nothing stronger than water."

"Well, upon my word. You're the first man I've met in the business who didn't drink. You'll take a smoke, then?"

"I don't smoke, either."

Sid Rex stepped back and looked Charlie all over, much in the way he would have regarded a new species of animal.

"Say, young man, are you giving me straight goods, or is this one of your jokes?"

"I'm giving it to you as straight as I can. I neither drink nor smoke."

"And you are Rickaby's advance man? Well, say——"

A sudden racket on the street cut off what he was about to say.

A carriage and a span of fine-looking horses came dashing around the corner.

Two or three persons started out from the walk to intercept the flying team, but only succeeded in frightening the animals the more.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Charlie, excitedly, "there's a little girl in that rig!"

Realizing the importance of immediate action, he dropped his grip, broke away from Mr. Rex, and, springing into the street, seized one of the animals by its bridle as the team flashed by the Opera House.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN WHICH CHARLIE MAKES A POWERFUL FRIEND AND RECEIVES A STARTLING SURPRISE.

Charlie had acted on the spur of the moment, thinking only of the danger which menaced the little girl.

The risk he was facing in attempting, single-handed, to stay the course of a pair of high-spirited animals, frantic with excitement, did not occur to him; nor, if it had, would the brave boy have hesitated.

It was a gallant act, and aroused the admiration of the bystanders and the people who stood in the stores and windows of the busiest street in Phalanx.

Fortunately, Unger had secured a good grip upon the harness of the off horse, else he must have been thrown to the street and trampled on by the scared animals.

As it was, their progress seemed in no wise checked, for they sprang forward at increased speed, dragging the nervy lad with them.

For several moments his position was one of extreme peril, but he clung desperately to his hold on the off horse, his iron muscles being equal to the strain.

Then, watching his chance, he made a flying leap to the animal's back.

Seizing both bridles, he exerted all his strength and pulled their heads up and back.

These tactics had the desired effect.

The animals snorted, and reared wildly, but Charlie gave them no relief.

The only thing he feared was they might lose their feet and he would be thrown head first into the road.

Fortunately, this peril was avoided.

The horses blundered on at gradually decreasing speed, until brought up standing by pedestrians who rushed into the street and stopped them.

Charlie dismounted, none the worse for his reckless ride, and began to pet and talk soothingly to the quivering steeds.

The little girl sat, pale and frightened, in the carriage.

A big crowd began to gather and stare at the rig, and make remarks about the wonderful sense of the child, as well as the courage of the boy who had averted a fatal smash-up.

"You've done a big thing, young man," remarked a bystander, admiringly. "You've saved the life of Ogden Burnett's little daughter. He's the mayor of this town, and the richest man in the county."

An electric car which had been racing down the street after the runaways came up at this moment and stopped.

A stout, handsomely-dressed gentleman stepped quickly from the platform and began to force his way through the crowd, which immediately made way for him.

He was intensely excited.

Finally he reached the side of the carriage, and held out his arms to the little girl, who sprang up when she saw him, and jumped into his arms.

"My darling, you are not hurt, are you?"

"No, papa, but I'm dreadfully frightened."

"Of course, you are. There, there, you're quite safe now."

"There is the boy who stopped the horses, papa," she said, pointing to Charlie, who was still patting the now almost calmed animals. "He did it all himself."

Mr. Burnett, leading his daughter by the hand, stepped up to Unger.

"Young man, I am deeply grateful to you for the service you have rendered my little one. You have probably saved her life. I would be pleased to know your name."

"Charles Unger, sir."

"Do you belong in Phalanx?"

"No, sir. I'm the advance agent of the 'Metropolitan Stock Company,' which appears at the Opera House in 'Fighting Fate,' Thursday evening," replied Charlie, thinking he might as well advertise the show while he was about it.

Ogden Burnett was a warm patron of the drama, and was not at all displeased, as some narrow-minded people might have been, to find himself under strong obligations to a member of the theatrical profession.

"Indeed! Then, of course, you are a stranger to our town. I beg you will permit me to offer you the hospitality of my home while you remain here. My name is Ogden Burnett. I am the mayor of Phalanx."

"I am pleased to know you, Mayor Burnett," said Charlie, lifting his hat respectfully. "I am much obliged for your kind invitation, but I am just on the point of leaving for Pittston by the 5.55 local."

"I'm afraid you have missed your train, as it is after six now. There's no other train for Pittston till the morning on this line; but if it is absolutely necessary for you to reach that town to-night I can drive you over to Hayward Junction, twelve miles from here, where I can have the Atlantic Express flagged for you, and arrange with the conductor to stop at Pittston and let you off."

"Never mind, sir. I'll wait for the eight o'clock local in the morning."

"Very well. Then, of course, you'll stay with us to-night?"

"Yes, sir, if you insist upon it."

"After what you have done for my little girl, and consequently for myself and wife, I certainly want you to accept my invitation. Let us go now. The horses are all right again. I cannot understand how they came to run away. They have never exhibited such a tendency before, though it is true they are spirited animals. Jump in, Mr. Unger."

Mayor Burnett lifted his daughter back into her old seat, got in himself, and drove off, the crowd giving him a rousing send-off.

At Charlie's request they stopped at the Opera House, and he rushed to the box office to ask if Mr. Rex had handed in his grip.

He had done so, and the boy recovered it.

Then he left the message he had called to deliver, and returned to the carriage.

Mayor Burnett was the president of the Phalanx Carriage & Wagon Works, and was considered the richest man in the county—at any rate, he was the most important.

He lived in a handsome mansion a mile outside of town, on the road to Dundee.

Charlie had never before been in such a fine house, and he was somewhat overpowered by its quiet magnificence.

Mrs. Burnett, a cheerful, matronly little woman, who assumed no airs because of her exalted position, made Charlie welcome, and when she learned of his brave con-

duct in behalf of her only child she could not do enough to testify her gratitude to the boy.

Of course, Charlie had to have a second dinner, for the meal was waiting the return of the master of the house and little Miss Burnett.

A butler and a maid servant waited on table, and though it was an every-day meal, Unger thought it was the best he had ever been up against.

After dinner Ogden Burnett took Charlie into his library and asked him what he could do for him.

"I am under such great obligations to you, Mr. Unger, that I shall not feel satisfied unless you will permit me to offer you some substantial evidence of our appreciation of your courage and presence of mind, but for which we might to-night have been childless," said the rich man, with emotion.

"I couldn't think of accepting anything, Mr. Burnett, that would look like a reward for what I did. While I know I took a great risk to save your little child from injury, perhaps death, it was, of course, a voluntary act on my part, and the knowledge that I was successful is sufficient reward in itself."

"Since you refuse to accept anything for your great service, I hope you will at least look upon me as your friend."

"I shall be glad to do so, sir."

"I make one more stipulation, and that is, if I can help you any way, either in or out of your profession, you will promise to call upon me."

"I will agree to do that," said Charlie. "I am anxious to have a company of my own some day, and it is possible I might take advantage of your generous request if circumstances would seem to justify it."

"I shall feel much hurt if you do not. Now tell me something about yourself and your hopes and prospects."

Charlie had scarcely started his story before a couple of reporters from the two daily papers of Phalanx called to interview him in respect to the runaway.

Unger, with an eye to business, told them that he hoped they would work in his connection with the "Metropolitan Stock Company," that was to show in town on the next night but one, and he gave them a few pointers about the combination which were new to the press.

After the gentlemen of the quill had departed, Charlie continued his story of his stage life, to which he added his ambitious determination to some day become the manager of a show himself.

"You certainly give every evidence of possessing the ability which goes to the front and stays there. When you feel that the time has come for you to branch out for yourself, if you lack the capital to put your enterprise before the public, communicate with me, and I will be your 'angel,' as I believe a theatrical backer is called," and Ogden Burnett smiled encouragingly.

"I thank you for your offer, sir, and will remember it," said Unger, secretly delighted, for with such a wealthy backer he felt sure he could carry a dramatic venture over the shoals on which so many poorly financed organizations go to pieces.

Mr. Burnett's coachman was ordered to drive Charlie to the station in the morning, and he got there in time to catch the 8.20 train.

After billing Pittston, Charlie started for the town of Jackson.

Here a startling surprise awaited him at the hotel.

It was in the shape of a telegram, which the clerk handed to him as soon as he had registered.

Tearing it open, he read these words:

"Return to Phalanx. Manager Rickaby dead.—Briggs."

CHAPTER XV.

IN WHICH CALL-BOY CHARLIE BECOMES MANAGER CHARLES UNGER.

"Rickaby dead!" gasped Charlie, leaning against the office counter for support, the shock was so sudden and startling.

It didn't seem possible the news could be true, for Manager Rickaby had always struck him as an uncommonly healthy man.

"I suppose it must be true," he breathed, after he had recovered his self-possession somewhat, "but I can't seem to realize it."

"Had bad news?" asked the clerk, curiously.

"Yes. The manager of our show is dead."

"You don't say. Rather sudden, isn't it?"

"Very," and Charlie turned away. "So I'm called back to Phalanx, where the company is billed to play to-night. I suppose that means that the jig is up. We'll disband and return to town. Too bad, when things were brightening up after our run of hard luck."

He went in and had his breakfast, then he inquired when he could catch a train for Phalanx.

"Half-past ten," answered the clerk.

"That will give me time to see the local manager and explain matters," said the boy to himself.

At two o'clock that afternoon he stepped off the train at Phalanx and made a bee-line for the hotel where the company was stopping.

The first person he ran against was Briggs, the stage manager.

"Come in here, and I'll talk to you," said Briggs, drawing the boy into the reading-room. "Mr. Rickaby shot himself last night, in Eleria."

"Shot himself!" exclaimed the boy, in pained surprise.

"Yes, in a gambling joint."

"Good gracious!"

"He was a confirmed gambler, but usually played in fair luck. Last night the weather was rotten, and we had a poor house. The same conditions held here in Phalanx, and the 'A Hot Old Time' struck the worst business they've been up against since they started out. Rickaby went off after he had settled with the local manager, and tried to recoup himself at a notorious place in Eleria. He was cleaned out to his last dollar. He woke me up

at four this morning to tell me he guessed the company would have to disband and get back to town as they could. It was raining like cats and dogs at that hour, and the newspaper reports of the afternoon before had indicated a continuance of bad weather, so the prospects of another poor night in this town was good. Rickaby handed me the tickets for this place, a circumstance which rather surprised me, then he went to his room, and at seven this morning I was awakened by the hotel clerk, who told me our manager was a suicide. That's all there is to it. We're here, but we're practically stranded, and that means bust. If the night turns out clear we may have a house; otherwise we won't show. It doesn't look encouraging at this moment."

The stage manager spoke truly, for the rain was beating heavily against the windows of the reading-room, and the street outside looked dreary and uncomfortable.

Unless the weather cleared there was small prospect that the people of Phalanx would care to venture from their comfortable homes to witness the finest show on earth.

"Pittston is billed," said Charlie, "but, of course, I didn't do anything at Jackson. I told the local manager of Rickaby's death, and requested him to hold the date for us, if applied for, until to-night, and he promised to do so."

"All right. By the way, Bulgin was here when we arrived, waiting to see Rickaby about taking up his work again. The news was an unpleasant surprise to him, for he hasn't a cent. I was thinking of reorganizing on the commonwealth plan, all hands to ante up what they can afford to get a start; but this weather has kind of discouraged us, and I don't know whether I'll propose it to the others or not. If we could only light on to an 'angel' with a few hundreds I'd much prefer it."

Briggs had nothing more to say; in fact, the situation was too gloomy to dwell upon, so Charlie ascertained the number of Estelle Vance's room and went upstairs to call on her.

The meeting was a distinct pleasure to both young people, and they had much to say to each other.

Charlie told her about his four weeks' experience ahead of the show, and his story both amused and interested her.

"Well, it did me a power of good, Estelle," he said. "I learned more about the show business than I ever expected to pick up in so short a time. I wouldn't be the least afraid to take a combination on the road on my own hook, if I had the capital. And that reminds me I haven't told you of my exciting experience right here in Phalanx."

"What experience was that?" asked the girl, interestedly.

"Don't say a word. It has made the mayor of this burg, who is a very wealthy man, my particular friend."

"Go on!" laughed the pretty leading woman, incredulously.

"Did you ever know me to tell you an untruth, Estelle?" he asked, earnestly.

"No, Charlie, I never did."

"Then lend me your pretty ears for a few minutes and I will a tale unfold that ought to please you."

Whereupon, Unger told about how he had rescued little Miss Burnett and saved the mayor's team from a smash-up; how he had afterward been carried away by the grateful father to his luxurious home on the Dundee road; how nicely he had been treated there by both Mr. Burnett and his wife, and finally how the gentleman had promised him a liberal financial backing whenever he went into the business on his own hook.

"Now," continued the boy, with animation, "what's the matter with my jumping into Mr. Rickaby's shoes, and saving the 'Metropolitan Stock Company' from going to pieces? Here's the whole show, complete, booked solid up to next May, and all that's needed to keep things moving is a little money to meet our present obligations, and provide against a possible streak of poor business during the next week. I've only to go to Mayor Burnett and ask for the dough, and it's mine without question. What do you say, sweetheart? Shall I do it, and put my shoulder to the wheel?"

Estelle blushed at the word "sweetheart," and did not immediately reply.

Charlie waited patiently for her to say something, as he had great respect for her advice.

"It's wonderful to think that you have a ready-made 'angel' waiting to be milked, as we people call it. If you think you can pull out and make a success of the venture, I advise you by all means to take advantage of your opportunity."

"You are in favor of it, then?" said Unger, in a pleased tone.

"Conditionally I am. That is, I mean if you really believe your ability is on a par with your confidence. Otherwise you will only throw away the gentleman's good money without benefiting yourself. You have this advantage; the show is, as you have said, in full running shape. We are well booked for the whole route. It isn't as risky as if you were starting out new with an untried production."

"That's right. Well, I'll make a call on Mr. Burnett and talk the matter over with him. I'll put the conditions and prospects squarely before him, and let him decide whether he'll take the risk or not of backing me. If he says yes, I'll come back and have a talk with Briggs, and make the necessary arrangements for going on."

Charlie was thoroughly enthused with the idea, and lost no time in going down to the mayor's office, three blocks away, and asking to see Mr. Burnett.

That gentleman was just preparing to set out for his home.

He was surprised, but nevertheless pleased, to see Unger, and readily consented to spare him time for the interview he asked for.

Then Charlie got right down to business, and laid his facts and figures before the great man of Phalanx.

Mr. Burnett listened attentively, asked many questions, and finally expressed himself satisfied that Charlie appeared to be equal to the emergency.

"How much money shall you require?" he asked the boy.

Charlie mentioned a moderate sum, but said it would be well for the success of the enterprise if Mr. Burnett would agree to stand for a touch in the event that the company got up against hard luck when the treasury was low.

"My dear boy, nothing will give me greater pleasure than to see you through this undertaking. Whatever money you may require at any time, telegraph me, and I will forward it to you. I shall take a personal interest in your show, and I expect to find that you will land a winner. Here is my check for double the sum you have asked me to start you with. Now good-by. I will be at the Opera House to-night, if the weather permits."

They shook hands warmly and parted, Charlie returning to the hotel in high spirits to consult with Briggs.

An hour later every member of the company was notified that the show would go on under new management, and that they would be expected to sign new contracts for the balance of the season with Charles Unger, late property man and advance agent, who had taken over everything, and would be responsible for salaries, which they were assured would be forthcoming regularly every Monday afternoon, whether business was good or otherwise.

"For heaven's sake, Charlie, who is backing you, and how did you find him?" asked Billy Duane, the most astonished of all the members of the company.

"Never mind, Billy. Just be thankful you are not out of a job, and that as long as yours truly is at the head of things you will be well provided for."

"Well, it seems too good to be true."

And that was the opinion of every member of the "Metropolitan Stock Company."

CHAPTER XVI.

IN WHICH CHARLIE PROVES THAT AS A MANAGER HE IS ALL TO THE GOOD.

"Our new manager says he's looking for experience," grinned Douglas Barnum to Frank Frost, the leading man, in their dressing-room that night.

"He can get lots of that," laughed the other; "but he's a clever boy, all right, and I shouldn't be surprised if he pulled out in good shape. Briggs says he's got a money bag at his back—the swellest kind of an 'angel.' What luck some people fall into!"

"I'll bet the 'angel' gets his leg stretched to the limit before the season is over," replied Barnum, with a sneer.

"What do you care, as long as you get your money?"

"Oh, I don't care," answered the heavy man, turning away and beginning to put on his make-up.

"It's turned out lucky for Bulgin. He was flat on his uppers when he came out of the hospital. Unger sent him on to Jackson by the 5.55 train, to take up the advance work where he left off. And do you know, to give the old

boy his due, Charlie did good work ahead of the show. You wouldn't imagine he started out a greenhorn. Take my word for it, that boy is a winner—he's all to the good."

Contrary to general expectation, the weather cleared off about dark.

Briggs declared this was encouraging for the new manager.

"You see, Charlie, the house was dark Monday and Tuesday, and the storm kept everybody indoors last evening when 'A Hot Old Time' played to rotten business, so you ought to be able to gather them in now that the atmospheric conditions are in our favor."

"I'm looking for a big crowd. I've billed this town myself, you know, and have worked every kind of a device for getting the people interested in 'Fighting Fate.' I shall be surprised if the results are not satisfactory."

Charlie, of course, stood at the door himself, and the people began coming before the doors were open.

The house filled up rapidly, and by eight o'clock every decent seat had been sold.

It was about this time that Mayor Burnett, his wife and little daughter, drove up, alighted and entered the Opera House.

He was recognized, of course.

Charlie had reserved the best box for him, and had instructed the ticket seller to refuse pay for it; but the mayor wouldn't have it that way.

He insisted on planking down his money like everybody else.

When the curtain rose at 8.10, the "standing room only" sign was displayed at the entrance, and late arrivals, determined to go in, had to content themselves with positions at the back of the rear orchestra and dress circle seats.

Truly it was a packed house—a thing that always brings joy to the hearts of the performers and management alike.

In due time Charlie counted the house and settled with the local manager.

"You are having a splendid send-off, young man," remarked the proprietor of the Opera House, after he stacked away in the office safe his share of the receipts of the night. "Considering we hadn't any advance sale to speak of, the crowd is an uncommonly remarkable one. I'm afraid it might have been different, though, if last evening had been fine—'A Hot Old Time' would have pulled 'em in, for lots of our people are ripe for that kind of a show."

Charlie, with Rickaby's past experience when up against the St. Louis combination in his mind, thought so, too.

"I wonder what kind of a rabbit's foot Unger has?" remarked Douglas Barnum to Frank Frost, three weeks from the night they had showed in Phalanx.

The company was in Peoria.

The weather had been bad the night before, though fair in Madison, twenty miles away, where the "Metropolitan Stock Company" had played to a good house, consequently the inhabitants of Peoria flocked like geese to the Opera House, until the S. R. O. sign had to be put outside before eight, and this fact had got around to the actors in their dressing-rooms.

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